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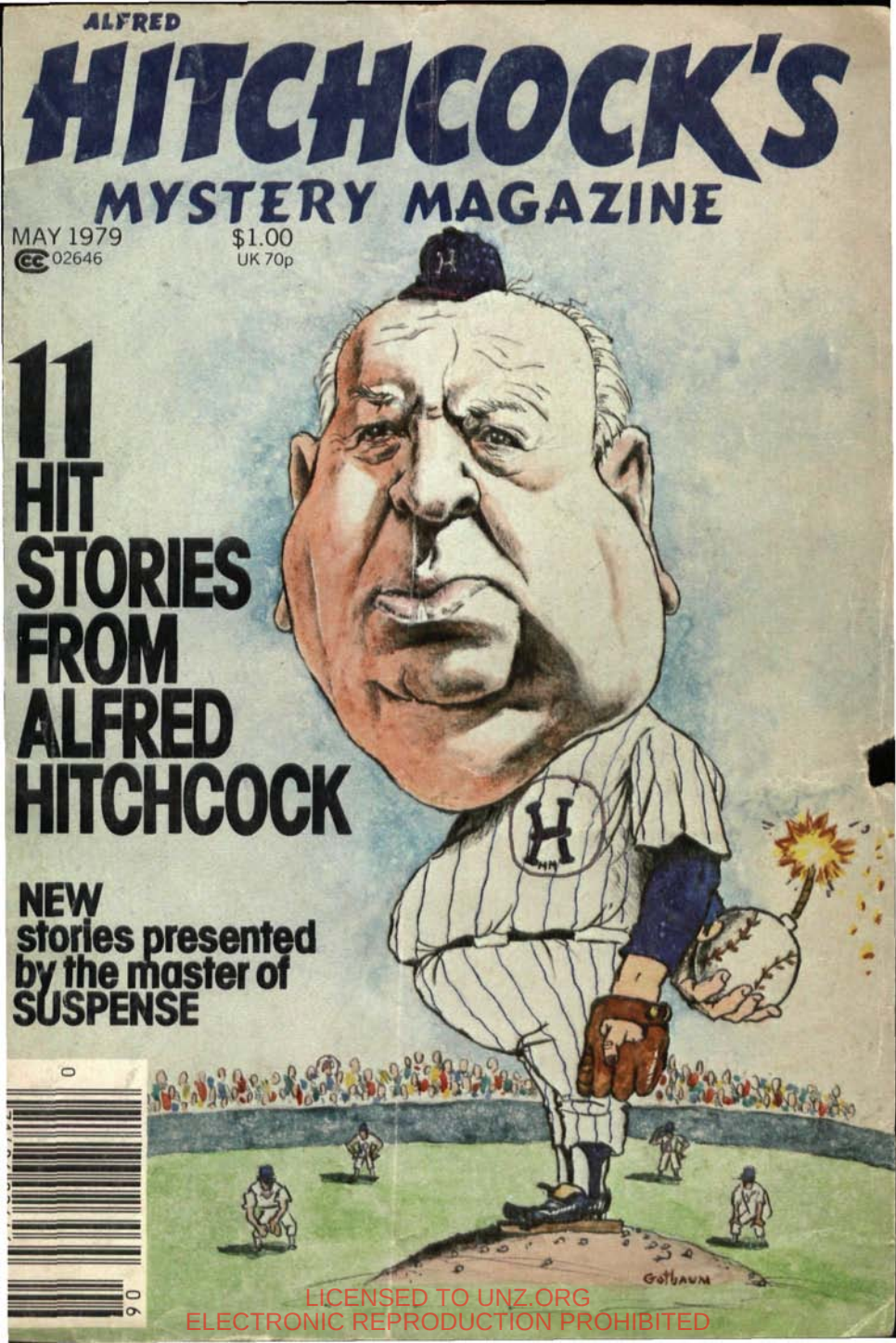

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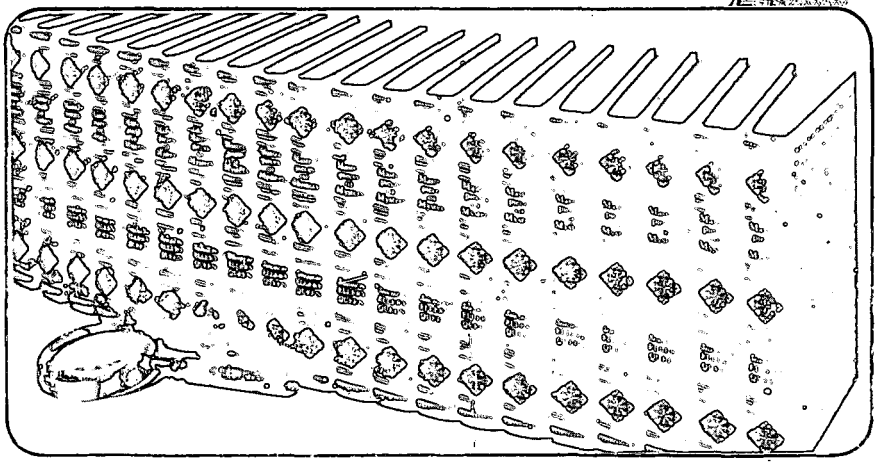

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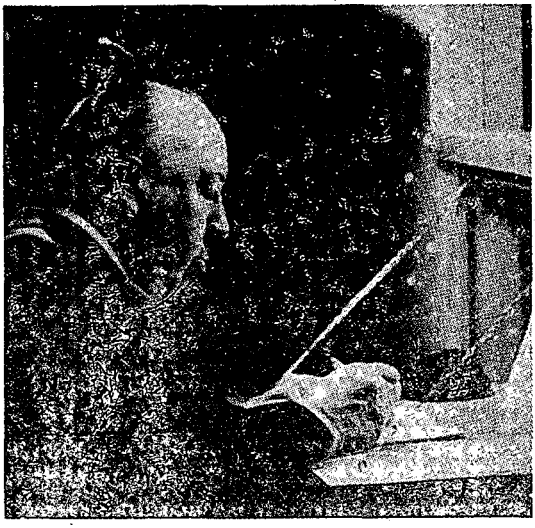

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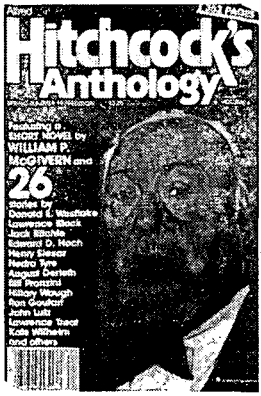

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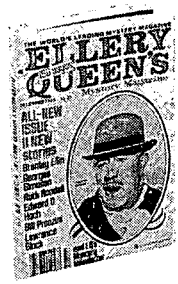

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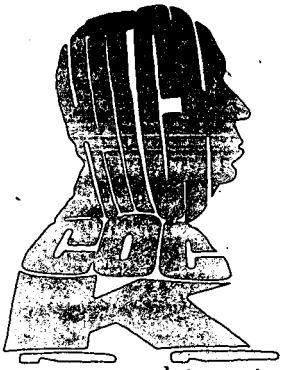

May 1979

Dear Reader:

As you will see, in spite of my activities as relief pitcher, I've put together an action-packed issue with detection by some of your favorite sleuths.

Edward D. Hoch's Violent Crimes squad investigates a murder that has its roots in the Depression in "Captain Leopold and the Murderer's Son." "A Case of Malicious Mschief" is uncovered by the Honorable Constance Morrison-Burke in Joyce Porter's story, and Bill Pronzini's "nameless" private eye solves a bizarre disappearance in "Thin Air." With the help of ancient wisdom Inspector Saito clears up a mystery in Seiko Legru's "Inspector Saito's Summary."

If you're a baseball fan as well as a mystery fan, you might want to take this issue out to the ball game to read between innings. But beware. You might find yourself missing some good plays as you become involved in these eleven exciting new stories.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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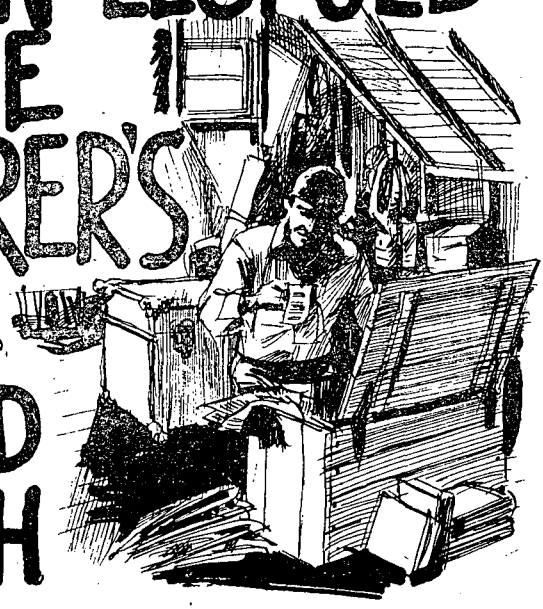
The murder had been committed 43 years before . . .

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD AND THE MURDERER'S SON

by EDWARD D. HOCH



Leopold would always remember it as the case he didn't solve.

The story actually began more than a week before he became involved, soon after the death of Frank Bozman's mother, while Frank was cleaning out the attic of her home on the pleasant tree-lined street where he'd grown up. It began when Frank Bozman learned his father was a murderer.

The knowledge came suddenly, in an electrifying shock that stunned

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him and left him dazed for a moment. A stack of newspaper clippings were shoved into a faded manila envelope. The last one was on top, and it gave the end of the story first: BOZMAN HANGS SELF ON DEATH ROW. One December night in 1936, his father had fashioned a noose from torn strips of his shirt and hanged himself before the state could do the job.

Frank flipped back to the earlier clippings and read through them from the beginning. His father, Russell Bozman, hadn't died in an automobile accident the year he was born at all. The sad story Frank's mother had told him a dozen times was nothing but a pack of lies. Russell Bozman had been one of three men caught by a policeman in the act of holding up a liquor store. According to three witnesses, Bozman had shot and fatally wounded the policeman before being wounded himself by the store owner. His two accomplices had fled on foot, but the police arrested them the following day. It was believed that the three had committed a series of armed robberies in the city, though they only stood trial for the holdup in which the policeman had died. All were found guilty. Bozman was sentenced to death while his two accomplices drew terms of twenty years to life.

Frank thought back to his childhood, trying to remember some casual remark by an unthinking relative or playmate that might have hinted at the truth. But there was nothing he could dredge up from his memory. His father had rarely been mentioned, but Frank had thought little of that. The dead are not often discussed. He'd grown up relatively comfortably in this house with his mother and his sister, and the absence of a father went all but unnoticed.

His sister Ruth was two years older, and his first thought was of her. Had she known the terrible truth about their father? He had to find out.

Ruth was still in town, though their mother's funeral had been two days earlier. She'd taken the opportunity to visit some old friends before returning to her husband and family in Arizona. The press of business, supposedly, had kept Ruth's husband from accompanying her, but Frank suspected they simply couldn't afford two air fares across the country.

He went downstairs to the kitchen where his wife Milly was wrapping glasses in newspaper and packing them in a large cardboard box. She stopped when she saw his expression, and read through the clippings he showed her. "You never knew any of this, Frank?" she said when she finished.

"Never."

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"Your mother never even hinted at it?"

He shook his head. "She said Dad was killed in an auto accident just a few months after I was born. In December. His car skidded on an icy road and overturned."

"Do you think Ruth knows?"

"That's what I've got to find out. I have to see her before she flies back to Arizona."

"We should have her to dinner," Milly said. "Let me call her."

Ruth had always been Frank's protective older sister, waiting for him after school, comforting him when he was upset. Even when she'd gone off to Arizona with her husband ten years before, she'd paused at the airport to ask if he'd be all right. That was the sort of sister she was.

Talking with her over drinks before they sat down to dinner the next evening, it was hard for him to believe she was a woman of forty-five. She looked no more than thirty, and she'd managed to retain a figure that was even better than he'd remembered it. She'd kept her hair a soft shade of brown and wore it carefully shaped to her face.

"You said you had something important to tell me," she said to Frank. "What is it?"

He took out the pile of clippings. "I found these in the attic yesterday."

She frowned, took the clippings, and read a few.

"Did you know about it?" Frank asked.

"No, I didn't," she said, her thoughts far away.

"I can't believe everyone could have kept it from us all these years. While we were children maybe, but why didn't anyone tell us after we grew up?"

"Who was there to tell us except Mother? We had no really close relatives, and we were living at the other end of the city when this happened. Besides, it was a liquor-store holdup—not the sort of thing people remember."

"I suppose you're right. And Mom couldn't face telling us."

"It all happened a long time ago," Milly said, bringing the pitcher to refill their glasses. "Nineteen thirty-six would still have been during the Depression, wouldn't it?"

"That doesn't excuse killing a policeman," Frank argued.

Both women could see how the revelation had affected him, and during dinner they made an effort to guide the conversation into other channels.

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"I really don't think you care," Frank accused Ruth at last. "We've just discovered our father was a murderer, and you sit there talking about life in Arizona!"

"It's a shock, Frank—of course it's a shock! But it happened forty-three years ago, to a man we never knew."

"He was our father, Ruth."

She closed her eyes for an instant, then reached for his hand. "I have my own family now, Frank, and they're miles away. I want to get back to them."

"But—"

"Can't you understand?"

"Yes," he said at last. "I can." Both their father and their mother had ceased to exist long ago for Ruth. She'd come back for the funeral, but that was all. She wanted no part in the past.

Ruth left the following morning. They drove her to the airport and kissed her goodbye. Then Frank settled down to thinking about his father as a murderer.

It took him only a few days to realize he could not live in peace unless he knew the whole story. Had Russell Bozman been driven to crime by the Depression and the need to support a wife and two children? Or was he a habitual criminal who would have chosen a life of crime under any conditions?

Without a starting point, Frank drifted down to the newspaper office. The reporter whose byline was on some of the articles was long dead, and the receptionist assured him there was no one at the paper who had been working there in 1936. Finally she called one of the reporters on the city desk who handled the courthouse beat. He was a slim, nervous man named Macbeth who chain-smoked cigarettes and carried a pencil behind his ear.

"Sam Macbeth," he said, extending a bony hand. "What can I do for you?"

Frank introduced himself and showed him the clippings. Macbeth read them over and tossed them on the red plastic couch between them.

"You can understand what a shock this was to me," Frank said. "I just feel I have to know more."

"There may be nothing more to know," Macbeth said. "Come on—we'll go up and check the morgue."

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The newspaper files yielded three more clippings but they dealt mainly with the two co-defendants and added nothing to Frank's knowledge of his father. It was discouraging but it gave him a new idea.

"Look here," he said to the reporter, "is there any chance either of these men might still be alive?"

Sam Macbeth did some quick mental calculations. "Fernandez would be 66 and Justin would be 68. Sure, they could both be alive. Your dad was a couple of years older than they were. I guess that's why the cops figured he was the ringleader."

"Could you check the prison?"

"After forty-three years they'd probably be out on parole—if they're still alive. But, sure—it's worth checking." He eyed Frank Bozman with renewed interest. "I might get a pretty good Sunday feature out of this."

It was some days before Frank heard from Sam Macbeth again. The reporter phoned him late in the evening, talking fast. Frank could hear voices and music in the background. "This is Macbeth. I've located one of those guys for you."

"I have to see him," Frank said. "Where are you?"

"A little bar down by the Sound. The Wharf—do you know where it is?"

"I'll find it." He knew it by reputation as a gambling spot.

"Good. But there's a problem. This guy doesn't want to talk unless you pay him. He wants a thousand dollars to tell you what he knows."

"What? That's crazy!"

"He says your dad owed him."

Frank let out his breath. "I'll come down and we'll talk about it."

"I'll be in my car, in the parking lot next to The Wharf."

Frank hung up and got his coat out of the hall closet. It was a mild October evening with a prediction of showers for later.

"You're not going out at this time of night?" Milly asked.

"I have to. That was that reporter, Macbeth, on the phone. He's located one of the men who was with my father."

"Oh, Frank—"

"I know. I know what you think. But I can't just forget it as if it never happened, Milly. The man was my father!"

"A father you never knew."

"We'll talk about it later," he said. "Right now I've got other problems.

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Macbeth says this man wants a thousand dollars."

"A thousand!"

"I know. Calm down, will you? I'm just going to talk to him."

"How do you know you can trust this reporter, Frank? Maybe he's trying to shake you down."

"Maybe he is," Frank agreed. "I'll find out."

"I don't like you going out this time of night." She put her arm around him. "Be careful, will you?"

"I will."

He drove south through the old residential section to the street that ran along Long Island Sound, past the neon-lit bars and the darkened marinas. Finally he saw the sign for The Wharf and pulled into the parking lot. He spotted the little blue Pinto that Sam Macbeth drove and parked next to it.

Macbeth was sitting behind the wheel, staring straight ahead. Frank opened the door on the driver's side and said, "Here I am. Where's this guy—?"

The words froze in his mouth. His hand brushed the side of the reporter's coat and came away bloody, and as he stood there Sam Macbeth's body toppled slowly out of the car and hit the pavement. Frank had just a glimpse of a knife handle protruding from his left side before Macbeth landed on it. He stood for a full minute, stunned and unable to move, seeing only the lengthening river of blood as it began to snake away from the body across the dark pavement. Was this the sight his father had seen, all those years ago?

A man in a checkered hat ran up and asked, "What happened? Did you stab him, mister?"

"No," Frank said, able to move at last. "But you'd better call the police."

He phoned Milly from Headquarters, where they took him for questioning, but she hadn't yet arrived when the stocky middle-aged man with greying hair walked through the door to confront him. "My name is Captain Leopold," he said. "I'm in charge of Violent Crimes."

"I'm Frank Bozman. I guess you know that."

Leopold nodded, pulling up a chair. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, my mother died two weeks ago—" Frank went over it all, from

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when he found the clippings to when he found Sam Macbeth's body.

"Which one did Macbeth find?" Leopold asked.

"Which one?"

"You mentioned two names, Fernandez and Justin."

"Oh. That's right, but I don't know which one he found. He never lived to tell me. Whoever it was must have killed him."

"Why?" Leopold asked. "Why should a man in his sixties who's served a prison term kill to keep his past quiet?"

"Maybe he has a new life now," Frank suggested. "A wife or children who don't know about the past." Just as he hadn't known. "Maybe he even escaped from prison."

"We'll check on both of them," Leopold promised. The phone at his elbow buzzed and he picked it up. He listened a moment and then hung up. "Your wife's outside, Mr. Bozman. Perhaps you'd like to see her."

"Am I free to go?"

"Not just yet," Leopold said. "We may have a few more questions. Naturally, you can have a lawyer present if you wish."

Leopold left him alone, and after a moment Milly came in. She looked tired, as she always did when she was awake after midnight. "What happened, Frank?" she asked.

"Macbeth was murdered. I found him dead in his car."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid the police think I did."

Captain Leopold took a cup of lukewarm coffee from the vending machine in the hall and went to his office. Though it was nearly one in the morning, Lieutenant Fletcher was still there too. Neither of them put it into words but they both knew that the killing of a newspaper reporter was second only to killing a cop in its ability to raise an uproar.

"Every newspaper in the state will have an editorial on it," Fletcher predicted. "If we don't solve it in forty-eight hours they'll be insisting it's a coverup."

"Check on these two names he gave us, will you, Fletcher? Fernandez and Justin. Find out what prison they were at and if they've been paroled. Get their parole officers out of bed if you have to."

"You believe his story?"

"I don't know. His father was a murderer. I don't buy the theory of inherited criminal tendencies, but if his story's true Macbeth may have

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been trying to shake him down. If the reporter had located one of those two old guys and the guy asked for a thousand dollars, why should he kill Macbeth before he got the money? It's more likely the money was Macbeth's idea."

"Did you know Macbeth?" Fletcher asked.

"I saw him around the courthouse a few times, but he was fairly new in town, wasn't he?"

"New and with a shady reputation among the other reporters. They've remarked that he'd do anything for a story."

"For this one he got himself murdered."

Leopold allowed Frank Bozman to go home shortly after two o'clock, cautioning him not to leave the city. There was no real evidence against him, but he was still the only suspect they had—at least until Fletcher tracked down Russell Bozman's two accomplices in that long-ago liquor-store holdup.

At three o'clock Fletcher reported there was no way to get the information from the state prison before morning. The old records were stored on computer tapes, and the people who operated the computer weren't available.

"The modern age," Leopold pronounced with a sigh. "Come on, Fletcher. Let's go home."

But Leopold never slept well with loose ends dangling, and the unsolved murder of a newsman was a definite loose end. He awakened after only a few hours' sleep and was back at his desk before nine o'clock when Sergeant Connie Trent came in with his morning coffee from the machine.

"They tell me you were here till three o'clock," she said.

He nodded. "I really need coffee this morning, even this foul stuff."

"I heard about Sam Macbeth on the news."

"Joe Dagony out at The Wharf found this Frank Bozman standing over the body and called us. Did you know Macbeth?"

She smiled. "He asked me out once about six months ago when he was new in town. Spent the whole evening trying to pump me about a case we were working on."

"A real charmer."

"Where's Fletcher? I was going to buy him coffee."

"Probably still in bed," said Leopold.

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"That's where you should be. You look tired."

They heard Fletcher in the squad room then, and in another moment he entered Leopold's office, feigning surprise. "I thought I'd beat you here *this* morning, Captain," he said.

"Find anything on Fernandez or Justin?"

"I just got off the phone. Fernandez was killed in a prison fight about twenty years ago. Justin was paroled around the same time. I'm checking on him now."

"Good—keep at it. If Justin is living in the city—"

The ringing phone interrupted him. Leopold answered and passed the receiver to Fletcher, who listened intently, thanked the caller, and hung up. "Another dead end. Justin died of lung cancer two years ago."

"So Macbeth had no one to deal with," Leopold said. "He was lying to Bozman, trying to shake him down. And that makes Bozman our prime suspect again."

Frank phoned Ruth in Arizona to tell her what had happened. She listened in silence and then asked, "Frank, why did you get involved with that reporter in the first place?"

"I needed some answers, Ruth. I can't go down to the office every day and stare at insurance policies knowing our father killed a policeman."

"What answers can you want after forty-three years?" she asked. "What *questions* are there after this long? You have to lead your own life, Frank."

After he hung up, Milly said, "I told you not to call her. She's not interested any more."

"How can she not be interested? He was her father as well as mine!"

"Try to look at it reasonably, Frank. What is it you want to learn? Even if you find the men who were with your father, what do you want them to tell you?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Except that I want to find out why they did it. I want to know if my father was a hardened criminal or a victim of the times."

"Does it matter now?"

"To me it does."

It was the following day at Frank's office that the call reached him. The voice was male, but muffled, and obviously disguised.

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"Frank Bozman?"
"Speaking."
"Do you still want to do business?"
"Who is this?"
"A friend of Sam Macbeth."
"I don't—"
"I have information to sell."
Frank felt the anticipation building within him. "About my father?"
"Yes."
"Who are you?"
"That's not important."
"Are you one of the men who was with my father?"
"Yes."
It was difficult to tell the age of the voice. It could have been that of an older man. "Where can I meet you?"
"The price has gone up. It'll cost you two thousand now."
"For what? What is it you've got to sell?"
"I can't discuss it over the phone. Will you bring the money or not?"
"Macbeth—" Frank began.
"Never mind Macbeth. I didn't kill him, if that's what you're thinking."
"All right," Frank said. "Can I meet you tonight?"
"You know the reservoir in Black Hill Park? There's a walk runs all the way around it—where the joggers work out."
"I know the place."
"Be there just after dark—around seven o'clock."
"How will I know you?"
"I'll know you," the voice said, and the connection was broken.
Frank Bozman waited a moment and then called Captain Leopold.

Leopold was vexed by the total absence of leads in the Macbeth killing, and by the lack of real evidence against Bozman. He could see the case slipping through his fingers, ending up as a folder in a drawer of unsolved crimes that nobody bothered to look at from one year to the next. So he was pleased with Bozman's call; it seemed to signal a break of some kind.
"Didn't you tell him they're both dead?" Fletcher asked when Leopold told him about it.
"Not yet. I want to see what he's up to. We'll go to Black Hill Park tonight and see who turns up."

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"No one will turn up, Captain. They're both dead."

"We'll see," Leopold said.

Connie was parked in a car at the foot of the hill, guarding the reservoir's only access road.

Fletcher, wearing a baggy grey sweatsuit he'd borrowed from his son, was giving a poor imitation of a jogger. "I'm too old for this kind of thing," he complained.

"It'll keep you in shape," Leopold said. He observed Fletcher's stomach. "Got your weapon in there?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Start trotting around. I'll go down and send Bozman up. It's almost seven o'clock."

Frank Bozman was sitting in the car with Connie. "Suppose he's up there already, watching all this?"

Leopold shook his head. "There's nobody up there now but a woman jogger and Fletcher. Unless he wants to climb the hill, he'll have to come in by this road."

"All right," Bozman said with a sigh. "I'll go up." He left the car and started walking.

"What do you think, Captain?" Connie asked.

"I think we're on a wild-goose chase. No one's going to show up and Bozman knows it. I just want to see how far he'll carry this little deception."

"You still think he killed Macbeth?"

"There's no one else. Fernandez and Justin are both dead."

"One thing, Captain. A reporter would probably be working on more than one story at a time," Connie pointed out. "Like a policeman. Macbeth's death may have nothing at all to do with Bozman's father. Hell, maybe a spurned girl friend stabbed him."

"Like you?" Leopold asked with a grin. "We haven't uncovered any special woman in his life, except for an ex-wife out in Oregon. Anything's possible—but remember, he was killed at a meeting place only Bozman knew about. Stay here," he said. "I'm going to scout around the other side of the reservoir and make sure no one's sneaking up that way."

But the opposite hill was deserted. Leopold edged near the top and sat down with his back against a tree to wait. There were enough dead leaves on the ground so he'd be able to hear anyone approaching.

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He waited an hour and no one came except a large beagle that sniffed around him and then dashed off.

At ten minutes after eight he climbed the hill to the top of the reservoir where Bozman was still waiting. Across the water they could see Fletcher resting on a park bench.

"He's not going to show," Leopold told Frank.

"You scared him off. I never should have called you."

"If you'd met him alone you might have ended up like Macbeth."

"I should have taken that chance."

Leopold sighed. "Well, he won't show now. Go on home and let us know if he calls again." He waved to Fletcher and signaled him to come around. Then they all walked down the road to Connie's car.

"No sign of him?" she asked.

"No," Leopold said. "We're giving it up."

Frank Bozman left them and walked over to where his car was parked. Leopold and Fletcher got into Connie's car.

"What do you think?" Fletcher asked.

"Damned if I know. He's a good actor."

"Did you tell him Fernandez and Justin are dead?"

"No, not yet."

"Maybe he's got a split personality," Connie suggested. "Maybe he killed Macbeth and doesn't know it."

"We need evidence, Connie. Something we can arrest him on."

"She could be right," Fletcher said. "Maybe the shock of learning his father was a killer tipped him over the edge. He could be imagining this guy phoning him."

Leopold shook his head. "I think whoever stabbed Sam Macbeth knew exactly what he was doing."

Connie Trent pulled out of the park road, passing Bozman's car on the way.

Frank watched the police drive off and sensed they didn't believe him. They thought he'd killed Macbeth and made up the story about the phone call. They thought he was a murderer like his father.

He was just turning the key in the ignition when he felt the cold metal blade at his throat. "What—?"

"Keep quiet and no tricks," the voice behind him said. "You told the cops, didn't you?"

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"Are you the man on the phone?"

"I'm the man. Turn off the motor." Frank did as he was told. "Did you bring the money?"

"I— Not on me."

"Why not? Because you figured the cops would grab me?"

"I was afraid to. That reporter was murdered—"

The blade pressed harder against his throat. "Never mind him. What is it you want to know?"

"About my father. Russell Bozman. Are you one of the men who was with him?"

He couldn't be sure, but the voice sounded younger than he'd expected, like the voice of someone his own age.

The man ignored the question. "How soon can you get the money?"

"It's at home."

"Suppose we drive there. Nice and easy, so we don't get stopped."

Frank Bozman turned on the ignition once more. The pressure of the knife on his throat had eased, but he was still conscious of the man's warm breath on his neck. "Are you Fernandez or Justin?" he asked.

"They're both dead," the man replied.

"What?"

"You heard me. Bull Justin was my father. He died of lung cancer two years ago."

"But Macbeth told me he'd contacted one of the men!" Frank protested.

"Macbeth came snooping around my father's old address. I'm living there now and I said maybe I could help him for a price. He was supposed to arrange a meeting between us but he got himself killed."

"By you?"

"I had no reason to kill him."

"What's your name?" Frank asked.

"They call me Bull too, same's my old man."

"He must have been in prison all those years—"

"Yeah. While I was growing up. He served twenty-three years of a life sentence before he was paroled. He was still only in his forties, but his life was over."

"I know how you must feel," Frank began. "When I learned that my father—"

"You don't have any idea how I feel! From what that reporter told me,

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you didn't even know your father killed a cop until a couple of weeks ago. I had to live with it all the time I was growing up, every month when we went to see him in the state prison!"

"I'm sorry."

"And it was all your father's fault! He was the one who planned the thing. He was the one who pulled the trigger."

"Your dad told you that?"

"He told me all about it. There was a time when he talked about nothing else. The three of them worked together moving furniture, but the pay was zilch and your father told them about this liquor store in a fancy part of town and all the money it took in on a weekend. It was the only place they ever tried to rob. And it all went wrong. Your father killed that cop."

"I'm sorry," Frank said. His mouth was dry.

"I didn't think about it much after he died, but then that reporter came around asking questions and I figured you owe me something for old Bull."

"Yes," Frank heard himself saying. "I owe you something."

He turned into his street and pulled into the driveway of his home. The living-room light was on and he could see Milly through the window. "Wait here in the car," he said. "I'll get the money for you."

The knife came up again. "No, I'm going with you, Bozman. Otherwise you'll call the cops."

"I—"

"Get out."

"I don't want you to alarm my wife."

"Then you'd better do as I say."

Frank got out of the car and started across the lawn, Justin behind him. He saw a figure jogging along the sidewalk, lit by the glow of the street light and somehow it seemed familiar. Justin saw the man too, and started to turn, but suddenly the figure left the sidewalk and was upon them. Justin's knife came up, but not fast enough.

"I've got a gun here!" the jogger shouted. "Police! Drop that weapon!"

Frank recognized the man then. It was Lieutenant Fletcher.

Leopold knew it was going to be another long night. First he had to explain to Bozman how they'd happened to be there, but that part had been simple. "It was all Connie Trent's doing. She stopped at a traffic

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light just outside the park and noticed your car wasn't following, even though we'd seen you start the motor. We pulled over and waited a bit, and when you finally did come out we could see someone in the back seat. We followed along and when you pulled into your driveway Fletcher got out and did his jogging stunt."

"I have to thank you," Frank Bozman said. "Once he got inside the house with that knife I don't know what he'd have done."

Leopold hurried on. "He denies any connection with Macbeth's killing. Fletcher and Connie are questioning him now, but they may not get very far."

"But who else could have done it?"

"What was his motive?" Leopold countered. "We always have to come back to the question of motive."

"That's why you suspect me? But don't you see? Now that Justin has appeared, that proves Macbeth wasn't trying to swindle me out of the thousand dollars. Justin really did ask for it and really did have information to sell. *I* had no motive for killing Macbeth."

"No," Leopold admitted. "*It wouldn't seem so.*" He shuffled through the papers on his desk. "But what about Justin? I'd like to charge him with kidnapping, but the only place he had you drive was to your own home. A defense attorney would claim you were going there anyway. We might have to settle for assault with a deadly weapon."

"I'm not hurt," Frank said. "Let him go."

"What?"

"I won't press charges, Captain. He's his father's son, even more than I am."

"We can hold him overnight. Think about it till morning."

After Bozman left, Leopold went in to oversee the questioning of Bull Justin. The man seemed frightened and cooperative, but not very helpful. "Tell us again about your meeting with Sam Macbeth," Leopold urged. "Tell us everything you can remember."

Justin wiped his upper lip. "How many times do you want to hear it? Macbeth came looking for my father. He'd gotten his last known address from the parole office, I suppose, but not the information that he was dead. When I found out he was digging into the liquor-store robbery, I told him I knew a lot about it from what my father had told me and said I'd meet with this guy Bozman for a thousand bucks. Business has been bad lately."

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"What business is that, Bull?" Fletcher asked. "You haven't done an honest day's work in years. Gambling, numbers—that's your line. Maybe a little narcotics on the side?"

"I never touch anything like that!" Justin said. "Sure, I make a little money gambling—who doesn't? That's why I told Macbeth I'd meet them at The Wharf, so I could collect on a couple of afternoon races. But I'm not into anything else."

"Did you see Macbeth at The Wharf?"

He shook his head. "When I drove up there were police cars all over the place. I figured something was wrong, so I kept going."

"Did you tell anyone else you were meeting him there?"

"No one."

"Not even your wife?"

Justin snorted. "I haven't seen her in about a year. I live alone most of the time."

Leopold led Fletcher aside and said in a low voice, "Lock him up till morning. I don't think Bozman will press charges, so we'll probably have to release him then."

Connie Trent followed Leopold back to his office. "I had a thought, Captain. I may be all wrong, but it's an idea. You just asked Justin if his wife knew where he was going."

"Well?"

"Did Frank Bozman's wife know where he was going?"

It was mid-morning the following day when Leopold and Connie called on Milly Bozman. She was a pleasant woman of around forty, and though she didn't seem disturbed by their arrival, her first words were, "Frank's gone to the office."

"We wanted to speak with you, Mrs. Bozman. I'm Captain Leopold. We met briefly at Headquarters the other evening. This is Sergeant Connie Trent. We have just a few routine questions about this affair."

She led them into the living room. "I know better than to think a captain of detectives goes around asking routine questions. Do you still think Frank killed that man, even though you've uncovered this fellow Justin?"

"We're still looking into every angle," Leopold answered. "Tell me something. Did you know where Frank was meeting Sam Macbeth that night? Was the parking lot at The Wharf specifically mentioned?"

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"No, it wasn't. Frank said the reporter wanted a thousand dollars and he was going off to meet him. But he didn't say where."

"I see."

"Why do you ask? Surely you don't suspect me?"

"We once had a case where a woman killed somebody for no other reason than to frame her husband for the crime."

Milly Bozman's face reddened. "Why would I do that? I love Frank!"

"We're not accusing you of anything, Mrs. Bozman," Leopold assured her. "We're just looking for information. Somewhere along the way your husband mentioned he has a sister out west."

"Ruth. They were very close growing up. I think he was disappointed that the news of their father's past didn't disturb her as much as it did him. Oh, disappointed is probably the wrong word, but I think you know what I mean. But Ruth has her own life now, far away from here. Frank can't understand that."

"Was there any sign that the revelation about his father might spark some dormant violence in Frank?"

"None at all. He's always been a peaceful man."

That was when the telephone rang.

It was Frank.

All that morning at the office Frank Bozman had been troubled. He'd told Leopold he wouldn't press charges against Justin, and he was convinced the convict's son had nothing to do with the killing of Sam Macbeth. But he knew this made him the prime suspect once more.

It was over coffee, reliving the moment when he'd found Macbeth's body, that he remembered what had happened.

And he knew.

He left the office, passing his secretary without a word, and got into his car.

He knew, but there was no proof. Not even enough to warrant a call to Leopold.

Whatever was to be done, he would have to do it himself.

He pulled up next to The Wharf and went in, walking past the bartender, who was washing glasses for the noon lunch crowd. "Not open yet," the man told him.

"I'm looking for the boss."

"Office in back." The bartender pointed, and went back to his glasses.

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Frank didn't bother to knock. The man looked up from his desk, startled. Even without the checkered hat Frank recognized him. "You're Joe Dagony, aren't you?"

Dagony stood up. "What do you want?"

"Remember me? In the parking lot that night? With Macbeth's body?"

"Yeah, I remember you. I called the cops."

"You did more. You killed Sam Macbeth."

"Get out of here! Are you crazy, man?"

"You saw Macbeth sitting in your parking lot and recognized him as a reporter. You were afraid he was checking on your gambling operation, or maybe something even more secret. You stabbed him in his car, and you were probably coming back to move the body when you ran into me."

"Can you prove this, mister?"

"Only to myself. You asked me if I stabbed him, remember? But he was lying on the knife—it wasn't visible. And you wouldn't have put your hat on to run out to the parking lot to see what was going on. You were coming back to the car to drive it away."

Joe Dagony's hand went for the letter opener on his desk, but he was older than Frank, and slower. The fight lasted only a moment before Dagony sagged in the corner, starting to bleed from Frank's fist. Frank picked up the letter opener and thought about using it on this man he hardly knew. It would be a lot easier than trying to convince Leopold of Dagony's guilt. But it wasn't something he could do.

He was no longer his father's son. That was all over. He might even call his sister later on and tell her so.

But for now he picked up the phone and called home.

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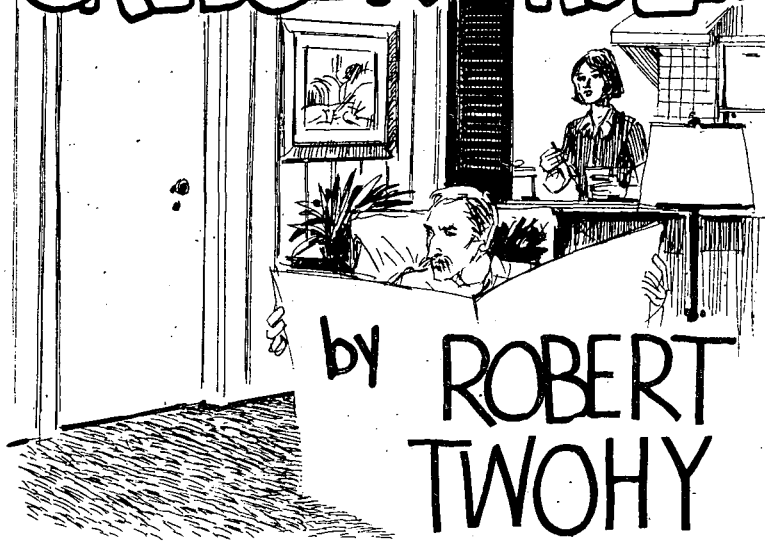
He had come from strange lands . . .

CRESCENT ROLLS



by ROBERT TWOHY

One bright Sunday afternoon in October Ellen Quirk was spooning peach yogurt from a cardboard carton into a dish in the kitchen of her pleasant cottage in the Splendid Visions Estates by the shores of the blue Pacific for her lover, Rufus Spaniell, 53, who lay on the sofa in the living room peering at the sports section of the paper, when the doorbell chimed.

Rufus raised his mean little eyes from the paper and mentioned with his usual perspicacity that someone was at the door.

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Ellen put the carton back in the refrigerator and the dish of yogurt on the kitchen table and bounced to the door, glad that at 36 she was still pretty because she had an odd feeling that someone interesting had arrived, and things might develop into excitement and even romance. And she could use some. She was pretty fed up with Rufus, who had those mean little eyes and a special inner repulsiveness. She opened the door, smiling and hopeful.

A hugely fat man stood there. His face was gross shiny pink flab with a button nose, rosebud lips, and bright, rather sad dark eyes. His floppy grey suit looked as if he had found it somewhere in a grimy wad.

He murmured, "How are you, Ellen?"

She was startled. She didn't know him, had never seen him.

"You look just the same."

The same as what?

"It might be three days, instead of three years." His voice was growly but not unpleasant, just as his eyes were bright and sad but not menacing.

Three years. Ellen's mind took a quick trip down memory lane.

Three years before, on a September evening, her husband Philip had announced he was going down to the all-night bakery. He had never come back to their apartment; she had never heard from him again. The police had done what they do when a man disappears and the result of their efforts was nothing. Philip was as gone as a lap upon standing.

Ellen had a good job as Executive Fitter at Fornucard's Fitness Factoriette in the Dazzling Dunes shopping center and had managed to purchase the darling little cottage in Splendid Visions, to keep up the payments, and even to survive. And as the months went by she was able to think less and less of Philip and of how wronged she had been. Now suddenly here stood this huge fat man, alluding to three years ago.

But he couldn't be her husband, not in any guise. Philip had been slim and blondish and 35. This creature was at least fifty and weighed 300 pounds, give or take a dozen. And nothing about him was remotely Philippian.

His vast rumpled form moved forward and it was too late to slam the door in his face. She gave way, stepping aside with a skittery quick-step, because he might have walked right through her—though she supposed he might have stopped, too, had she stood fast. She stared at him and said in a tight voice, "Who do you think you are?"

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From the sofa Rufus inquired, "What's going on?"

"Who's that?" said the fat man, stopping and gazing at Rufus.

Ellen said, "I know who *he* is. Who are *you*?"

The man laughed, a low burbly sound, and reached for her awkwardly, a little smile pursing the rosebud.

Ellen emitted a small cry and pranced backward out of reach.

The man murmured, "I'm sorry. I got carried away. I must exercise control."

Rufus had flung the sports page aside and jumped from the sofa. "Keep your lousy paws off her, you! Get away from him, Ellen!" As if she had been the instigator.

The fat man said in a soothing voice, "Try to keep out of things you don't understand."

Rufus's eyes bulged in his narrow face. His thin neck bulged too, and his long nose seemed to get longer and thinner, with a white dot appearing at the end. His bristly grey moustache seemed to separate into spiky, quivering hairs. He was a frail man, but he considered himself a battler, and he was not about to back down even though giving away some 170 pounds. "Get out of here! Get out, or—" He clenched and unclenched his fists. His hot eyes darted to the fireplace and espied the poker. "Move!" he barked nasally. "Right now!"

The fat man turned to Ellen and said, "I'm very tired. Tell him to go home."

Ellen just stared at him, as did Rufus.

He turned toward the kitchen area. "What do you have to eat? I'm famished."

He gazed upon the dish of peach yogurt on the table. "What's that?"

"Yogurt," said Ellen in a small voice.

He picked up the dish. It looked like a little girl's play dish in his enormous fists. He put it to his rosebud lips and started, rather daintily, to suck it down.

Rufus made his leap to the poker and crouched, waving the weapon. "Put down my yogurt and get out of here!"

The fat man continued to suck down the yogurt until, finished, he put the dish on the table and said to Ellen, "Can't you get rid of him?"

Rufus screamed, "I'm going to bust your fat skull!"

"Don't!" cried Ellen.

"Don't be nervous," said the fat man. "He's just putting on a show."

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But Rufus wasn't. He was a man whose inner repulsiveness, under stress, could be transformed into explosive rage. Sailing through the air, he swung the poker with all the ferocity his small form could generate. The poker thonked on the fat man's skull. The fat man looked mildly surprised, then turned into collapsing rubber and went down.

They gazed down at the vast, sprawled mass of unkempt clothes and Ellen whispered, "Is he—?"

"It looks like it." Rufus walked over to the fireplace and put the poker back where it belonged, returned to the body, knelt by it, put his hand on the chest, looked solemn, shook his head, peeled back an eyelid, and gazed at the sad dark eye. "He never knew what hit him. But I was in the right. He should have gone when I told him to."

Ellen went on pretty legs now somewhat tottery to a chair and sat down and looked at the heap on the rug.

Rufus got up and considered the situation. He felt completely justified, yet he realized that if it should come to a trial juries could be unpredictable. He suspected that in many cases a lot depended on whether the jury had a good feeling about the defendant. Generally Rufus tried to conceal his inner repulsiveness, but it was always there, and in the stress of a trial it might come surging to the surface, visible to all. He might get the book thrown at him. It was unfair, no doubt about it, but—life was unfair.

Having worked this out, he said, "We'd better use *your* car."

"What?" said Ellen in a faraway voice.

"Mine's out front and yours is in the garage, and anyway I got those sacks of lawn food in the trunk." Rufus owned a fashionable fertilizer shop in the Ecstatic Hills section of the city. "You got an old blanket?"

"What?"

"We can turn back the rug and roll him onto a blanket and drag him over to the back door, then across the patio to the back door of the garage and into the trunk of your car."

"What?" murmured Ellen.

He paced a little, stroking his chin and frowning. He couldn't fault her for letting her mind wander. Women aren't geared to having large intruders suddenly smashed flat on their living-room rugs. But he saw no point in moving the sacks of lawn food from his car when hers was already in the garage, its trunk unoccupied. He ran through it again quickly.

"We'll drag him in the back door of the garage and get him in the

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trunk of your car and drive somewhere quiet up the coast, wait until dark, then dump him in the ocean."

"No."

He stopped pacing, turned, and stared at her. "What?"

Ellen murmured, "I didn't say anything."

She was staring at the heap on the floor. Rufus looked at the heap. The heap was now sitting, shaking its head slowly.

"No ocean," it said in its growly voice. "I've had enough of oceans."

Rufus went quickly to the fireplace and grasped the poker.

Ellen gasped. "Don't hit him again!"

"I will if he doesn't get up right now and start traveling."

The fat man sat on the rug looking sad but calm and not at all perturbed by what had been a really appalling blow. No marks showed on his head. He didn't seem hurt or even woozy.

The tip of Rufus's nose was whitening again. He came close, waving the poker. "Right now! I mean it! *Move it!*"

"Don't, Rufus!" Ellen jumped from her chair. "We have to talk—sort this whole thing out."

"There's nothing to sort," Rufus snarled. "This slob barges in and wolfs down my yogurt—all right, I won't hit him again, but I'm calling the cops." Bearing the poker, he marched to the phone.

The fat man moved to the sofa and sat down on it—slowly, Ellen was glad to see, because a fast drop of his great weight could devastate it. He seemed to be considerate of nice furnishings. Gross as he was, he didn't seem crude or unkind. She sensed a lack of inner repulsiveness.

The poker resting against his knee, Rufus said into the phone, "Come out to 647385 Gandleberrytree Terrace right away. A guy has forced his way into the house and refuses to leave."

The policeperson got his name, a repeat of the address, and said a car would be on its way.

Rufus snarled at the fat man, "Now we wait."

The man gazed at him with his bright sad eyes, and smiled.

Ellen said, "Would anyone like a cup of coffee?"

Nobody did. Rufus took a chair and sat tensely, both small hands tight on the poker across his knees. The fat man sat placidly gazing about the room, at the bookcases, the draperies, the paintings. He nodded. "Nice. You always had good taste, Ellen."

"How would *you* know?" Rufus inquired.

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The fat man looked at him. "You're the exception."

It was said pleasantly, in that growly voice. Somehow it struck Ellen funny, but she held back a giggle.

Rufus scowled at the fat man. "I should clonk you again."

"I understand your feeling."

Ellen got up. She had heard a car. She bounced to the window. A blue police car was pulling up behind Rufus's car, in front of the house. Two policemen were approaching the door, the one in front lean and purposeful, the other one older, tending toward a pear shape.

She opened the door. "Come in," she said brightly. "I'm Ellen Quirk."

They came in and looked at the fat man on the sofa, and at Rufus, who was standing now, holding the poker. The lean one said, "What's the story here?"

Rufus said, "This slob forced his way in and refuses to leave."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Rufus Spaniell. I operate *Chez Spaniell* in Ecstatic Hills. I'm the one who called to make the complaint."

"You're the householder here?"

"Mrs. Quirk is. I'm a friend."

"Why are you holding that poker?"

"Because of this slob here."

"Did he threaten you?"

"His size is a threat."

"Put the poker down."

Rufus did so, against the fireplace.

The policeman gazed at the fat man, who gazed amiably back. The less knifelike policeman stood inconspicuously near a wall. The lean one said, "What's the story?"

The fat man said, "I came across several oceans. I've been in lands that are strange and some that are stranger."

"Who are you?"

"Names are of no consequence."

"Maybe not," said the unobtrusive policeman, now leaning against the wall, "but we need one for our report." He had a notebook out.

The fat man said, "Refer to me as Ravenal Sprink."

"That's your name?"

"I'm tired," said the fat man. "Quite tired. But I feel at peace. I've come home." He turned his bright sad eyes to Ellen.

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Rufus said, "He's a lunatic. That's obvious. And he's dangerous. Look at the size of him."

The lean policeman paced a bit, frowning. He looked like a man who had set his mind on getting to the bottom of something. "I'm trying to get the picture here." He turned to Ellen. "You're the householder?"

She nodded.

"Who's this Mr. Sprink?"

"I don't know."

"He forced his way in?"

"Not exactly. He just kind of started to move, and then he was in."

"He didn't force the door?"

"No, the door was open."

"You opened the door for him?"

"Yes."

The policeman strolled again. The fat man gazed at him placidly. The policeman said, "Did he threaten you?"

"No."

"Did he say he was going to hurt anyone, or rob the place?"

"No."

Rufus said, "He ate my dish of yogurt."

Both policemen looked at him. Rufus said quickly, "Well, that's something, isn't it? I mean, something you can charge him with? Petty theft is a crime, isn't it? He took the yogurt and ate it and it was mine, set out for me. I'll testify to that. He ate it without asking permission from Mrs. Quirk or me."

The policeman said to Ellen, "Is that true?"

"That he ate the yogurt? Yes."

She looked at the fat man on the sofa and gave a peal of laughter. The fat man smiled. The other policeman was writing in his notebook, and his face showed the trace of a smile.

Rufus muttered, "I feel I'm being made a fool of." He felt more; he felt betrayed. Ellen had laughed at him. He said to her, "Are you finding all this so funny?"

Her face reddened and she pinched her lips tight to hold in the laughter. She turned away, her shoulders shaking, and nodded.

"I'm disappointed in you, Ellen," said Rufus. She tried to look contrite. "This was no joke. Don't forget what happened."

"What was that?" asked the lean policeman.

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"Nothing." Rufus looked at the fat man. The fat man looked back benevolently.

Rufus muttered, "You must have a head like oak."

The fat man nodded, and smiled.

"I'm *very* disappointed in you, Ellen. Seeing humor in a situation that had such desperate elements."

"What situation?" asked the policeman. "What elements?"

"Nothing. Do you want to ask me anything more about this—this lunatic?"

The policeman glanced at his colleague, who made a micromillimetric sideward movement of his head.

"Goodbye, Ellen."

"Goodbye, Rufus."

Rufus went to the door, stopped, stood a moment, and gazed at the man on the sofa. He said at length, "I'm sick of the sight of you." He departed.

The lean policeman said to Ellen, "Are you making any charge against Mr. Sprink?"

She shook her head.

"Do you want him to go?"

"He can stay a little, if he's tired."

"Tired and hungry," said the fat man.

The policeman said, "Then we've done all that we can." And the two policemen left.

Ellen and the fat man looked at each other. Ellen said, "Is that really your name?"

"Jasper Scrimshaw? No."

"Ravenal Sprink."

"Oh. Was that the name I gave them?"

"Yes."

"They seemed satisfied with it."

They looked at each other.

She said, "What now?"

"I'm hungry." He heaved up carefully from the sofa and moved toward the kitchen area. "After I eat something, I'll tell you about myself—about the strange lands I've come from and why I'm here. It may not be true, but it should be interesting."

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"Why won't it be true?"

He paused at the kitchen partition, turned, and smiled at her. "It may be, it may not be. It's true as far as I know, but I may have imagined it all—how on my way to get crescent rolls on a September night three years ago I was kidnapped by foreign agents, driven to the waterfront, rowed out to a seaplane, taken to a far land, subjected to torture by heated needles to make me divulge government secrets I didn't know, somehow escaped with the aid of a beautiful woman in a gold-spangled mask with cobra eyes who kept me in her palace in a male harem, and how, escaping from there, I was hidden by strange dark monks in a monastery in India, or maybe it was Sri Lanka. I'll tell you how they informed me that I must donate my body to their order, for someone very ill and very exalted needed to inhabit it for a time and I must take up residence in the only other one they had handy then, this gross 300-pound body you see standing here—and if I would do so, I could come back home. And I agreed. And in some manner crossed through oceans all green and whirling, and here I am."

He stopped. Ellen sat without moving, looking at him. She had heard every word, but her mind kept returning to the words that had led off this oration—a night in September three years ago, leaving home in quest of crescent rolls.

She said, "How did you know that?"

"That I went out for crescent rolls three years ago and never came back?"

"I never mentioned crescent rolls to anyone at the time—it never came up, wasn't in the papers. I just told the police that Philip had gone out to the all-night bakery."

He said softly, "This is a body which has been drained of all corrupting materials. I was kidnapped, mistaken for a government agent, flown overseas, subjected to needle torture, incarcerated in a male harem, escaped to a monastery, and persuaded to take up residence in this dead body—" He gave a burble of laughter. "Isn't that ridiculous? Isn't it absurd? A child's fantasy!"

They gazed at each other.

"Maybe a fantasy with a purpose," said Ellen. "Maybe you want a place here in my house, a position. Maybe you're trying to play a game on a local woman you found out had a missing husband. So you read up on the disappearance in old newspapers. Or maybe you're just a crazy

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game-player who just loves games for the sake of playing them."

"Exactly." He nodded, and his sad eyes were bright. "A game on a sweet, soft-headed woman who has a feel for romance. Quite probably that's exactly what it is. It's too ridiculous to even consider the possibility that I'm really Philip Quirk, temporarily occupying the body of a long-dead fat man."

"Temporarily?"

"I hope so. It's very hard to operate. My brain and my senses aren't connected with it. That's why your intense friend with the poker didn't hurt me. I got jarred inside and passed out for a few moments—but that's not believable either, is it?"

"No," said Ellen.

He smiled and moved around the partition. She heard the refrigerator door open.

She said, "How do you operate the body?"

"With silken cords. I peer out of the eyes and when I pull the cords the eyes wrinkle and the nose snorts and the lips move, and when I pump my feet the lungs breathe. Ellen," he said, "you've always been a lover of fantasy, but you're a grown woman—surely you can't believe any of this nonsense?"

She was quiet. How could he know she had always loved fantasy? And . . . "Crescent rolls? How did you know that?"

He came back in view, and he had the large bowl full of turkey hash left over from last night's dinner. He put it on the table and turned to the sideboard for a fork. "Maybe just coincidence. The words just popped into my head—crescent rolls. The last two words your husband spoke when he left the apartment that night."

He sat down in a kitchen chair and began to eat. He ate like an expert. He was quick and devastating but not vulgar. Nor had Philip been. It seemed only seconds before the bowl gleamed empty.

He sighed, patted his rosebud lips with a paper napkin, and said, "Sumptuous."

"And now?"

"Now I would like to lie on the couch, and sleep." Quite suddenly she saw that he looked terribly weary; his huge face sagged. "For forty hours. When I awaken, this gross body may be gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"I don't know. But that's what the dark monks said—that if I was

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accepted back into my home, and believed in, this body would be gone."

"And what would be in its place?"

He got up, slowly and ponderously, from the flimsy chair and moved, on legs that now seemed almost too weak to carry him, to the sofa. His voice was thin.

"Who knows? Maybe the body of Philip Quirk, if the exalted one who was ill and needed it is through with it. Maybe a body even grosser than this one. Whatever body it is, it will be me inside."

He was at the sofa. He stood there a few moments, swaying a little, then carefully let himself down and, with a small sigh, stretched out. His vast bulk swelled like a mountain range.

He turned his fat pink face to her and winked. "Do you believe any of that?"

She shook her head slowly.

He said softly, "Why should you? In your shoes, I wouldn't either."

He gave another sigh, and a discreet burp—then closed his bright sad eyes.

She looked at him, sleeping quietly supine, a vast shabby man who had just consumed a great quantity of turkey hash, and should be snoring prodigiously. He slept without sound.

She went over to him and listened for a breath. She heard nothing.

She put her ear close, and felt no breath on her ear.

Going back to her chair, she sat looking at him—a grossly fat man who had been struck down suddenly after a too-hearty meal. Suddenly, a picture came into her head of Philip, lithe and ebullient, pausing at the apartment door to sing out to her, "Now the cow croaks, now the bell tolls—I've a yearning for succulent crescent rolls!"

Ellen put her hands to her head, and for a long time she stared at the man on the sofa, feeling dizzy and weary and frightened and very small.

She had no doubt that if she sent for a doctor he would make the pronouncement that before him lay a coronary victim.

But the man had said, "If I was believed in—" And perhaps the body of a grossly fat man on her sofa would prove only that she hadn't believed.

She went to a closet, got a blanket, which she laid over the man, then she went back to her chair, put her head back, closed her eyes, and let her mind play with how it would be when after forty hours the blanket was tossed aside and Philip stepped nimbly from the sofa.

She gave a little smiling grimace and shook her head, then thought,

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Why not? Why not dream, why not believe? The forty hours would pass in any case. If it was just a dead man lying there he wouldn't lie any deader forty hours from now. And if—if it were Philip she would have forty hours of hope she wouldn't have otherwise.

So the hours passed. She didn't leave the house, calling in to Fornucard's in the morning to say she thought she had the flu. Monday passed, and Monday night. Most of the time she sat in the chair and watched over the unmoving shape on the sofa, and tried to believe—and finally did believe.

When, on Tuesday morning, forty hours had passed, she went to the still shape under the blanket and looked at it a while. Then she went to the phone.

Policemen came, and a police doctor, who bent by the couch and gave his pronouncement. Men came with a stretcher. And finally Ellen stood at the window, watching the police ambulance as it bore the remains of the fat man away.

The police lieutenant looked at the pretty little woman with the strange eyes and said, "Why did you wait so long to report it?"

"Because I believed he was asleep."

And she had. She *had* believed that Philip was asleep in there. And maybe he had been—maybe she just hadn't believed enough.

As the fat man had said, she was a lover of fantasy.

How had he known that? And how had he known that Philip's last words to her had been "crescent rolls?"

To look at things realistically is wise, but it doesn't seem to account for everything that happens.

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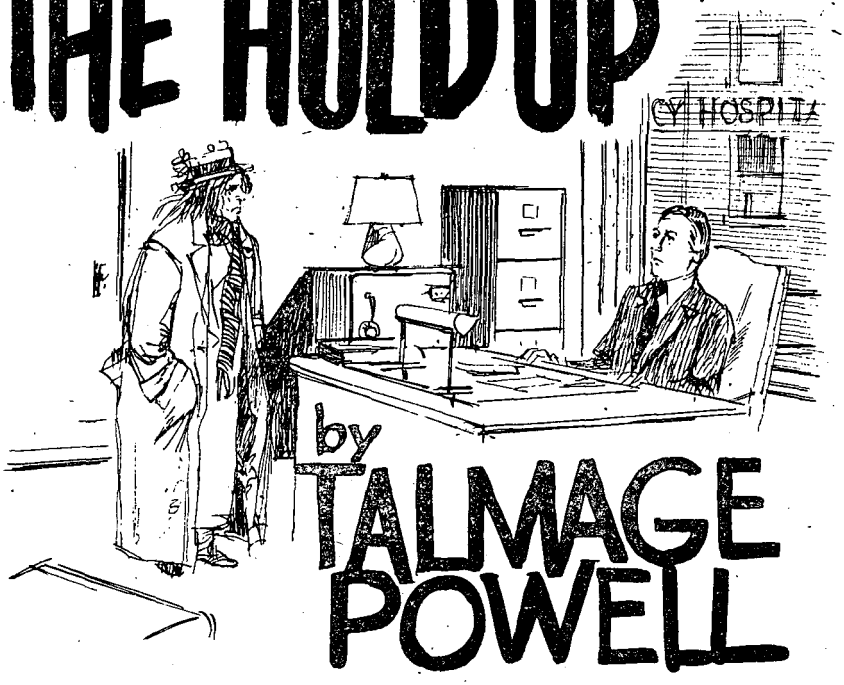
How did the horrible old woman get into Percy's office unannounced? . . .

THE HOLD UP



by TALMAGE POWELL

Percy Kittridge, finance director of Memorial to Mercy Hospital, frowned in sharp distaste as the old woman appeared in his office. Percy was a neat, precise man of little finicky gestures, and the woman was a horrible old wretch. In a seedy greatcoat that hung almost to her ankles, she was like a mass of pillows lumpishly piled together. Her face was a study in wrinkles and tiny wens. Beneath an old straw hat decorated with imitation flowers, her hair dripped like Spanish moss on an ancient tree.

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One moment Percy was rocked back behind his desk, looking out the window and comfortably chatting on the phone, the next he was swinging his chair around to hang up the telephone and there stood the old lady.

"How did you get in here unannounced?" Percy demanded in his rather high, impatient voice.

The old woman pointed to the tattered scarf wrapped about her throat. She was wearing cheap cotton gloves—probably, Percy thought, to hide leprous hands.

"Just walked in," she said in a raspy whisper, "when no one in the outer office was paying attention. No trick to it."

"Well, I'm a busy man. What do you want?"

The old woman's right hand was in the side pocket of her bedraggled outer coat. She lifted the hand. It was gripping a deadly looking automatic.

"I want all the money out of the hospital safe," she crackled.

Percy gasped, on the edge of a sudden faint. His thin lips quivered in a fruitless effort to speak. His bright eyes were parallaxed on the gun.

"Be a nice, sensible li'l fella," the crone instructed, "and you can tell your wife about this at dinner tonight. Otherwise, you're a DOA all full of bullet holes when they cart you over to the emergency room a few seconds from now."

"I—uh—this doesn't make sense," Percy managed. "People steal drugs from hospitals, not money."

"There's a first time for everything," the nightmare image said. "You have just one more tick of the clock to move it."

Percy flinched back from his desk, tottering to his feet. "Hospitals do most of their business in paper," he said, struggling for courage. "Medicare and Medicaid checks, checks from insurance companies and patients. Wouldn't it be better to rob some other—"

"Can't rob but one place at a time," the old woman croaked. "And I'm here now. You do plenty of cash business. Everybody don't pay by check. And there's the cash flow from your cafeteria, snack bar, gift shop, parking lot, florist concession. I'm sure the safe is stuffed with more than enough for the likes of me." The muzzle of the gun inched up. "Your time has run out, fella."

Kittridge jumped. "Be careful with that thing! I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying!"

The horrid old woman used her free hand to pull a shopping bag from

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under her coat. "Put the money in this. I want it all, including the silver. The checks you can keep."

A few minutes later, she was shuffling across one of the broad parking lots adjacent to the huge medical complex and Mr. Kittridge was on the floor of the anteroom next to his office, slumped beside the empty vault, a lump on his crown from a tap of the gun barrel.

The old woman paused beside a pickup truck with a camper cover. There were acres of cars but few people on the parking lot. Satisfied that she was unnoticed, the old woman disappeared.

Under the camper cover the crone worked quickly. And, stripping off the thickly padded coat, gloves, hat, wig, and rubberoid face mask, she was transformed into a nice-looking young man, dark-haired and clean-cut, in jeans and a knitted shirt.

He stuffed the accoutrements of his disguise into a foot locker. He would burn the items a little later, in a place even more private than the camper.

Snapping open the stuffed shopping bag, he dipped his hands into the money. He'd estimated it as the finance director had taken it from the safe—twenty thousand at least. Not an earth-shaking haul, but a nice return on the execution of a carefully structured plan.

Slightly short of breath, the young man fashioned a stack of bills from the bag—twenties, fifties, and hundreds. He stuffed the roll into the pocket of his jeans, then he added the bulky shopping bag to the contents of the foot locker and closed and locked it.

Slipping into the driver's seat, he drove the camper carefully from the parking lot to the drive-in window of a nearby branch bank, where he deposited the money from his jeans pocket. Tucking the deposit slip into his wallet, he smiled a good afternoon to the teller and drove back to the hospital. The automatic barricade at the parking lot swung up, admitting the camper as the young man dropped quarters into the parking-fee slot. The camper wended about and finally slipped into a vacant space reasonably close to the main hospital building.

When the young man walked into the business office, he felt the residue of excitement. Employees had vacated desks and frosted-glass cubicles, clustering at the water cooler to exchange strained murmurs. A middle-aged woman spotted him and came over to the counter.

"It's been quite an afternoon," she said. "We had a robbery."

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"No!"

"Yes. An old woman, would you believe it? She walked into Mr. Kittridge's office and forced him to open the vault at gunpoint, then cracked him on the head and disappeared. Mr. Kittridge sounded the alarm when he regained consciousness. He gave the police a full description, but I don't know—you know how it is these days. So many unsolved crimes. But an old woman—would you believe it?"

The young man commiserated with a shake of his head.

The cashier drew a steadying breath. "But that's our problem, isn't it? What can I do for you?"

"I came to take my wife home," the young man said. "The doctor said she could leave as soon as I settle the bill. So I guess we can say goodbye and thanks for everything. It's been a long five weeks."

"And after five weeks," the cashier said in sympathy, "quite a bill."

"No sweat," the young man said. "My private hospitalization plan should be adequate. But I'll need to borrow a pen to write the check."

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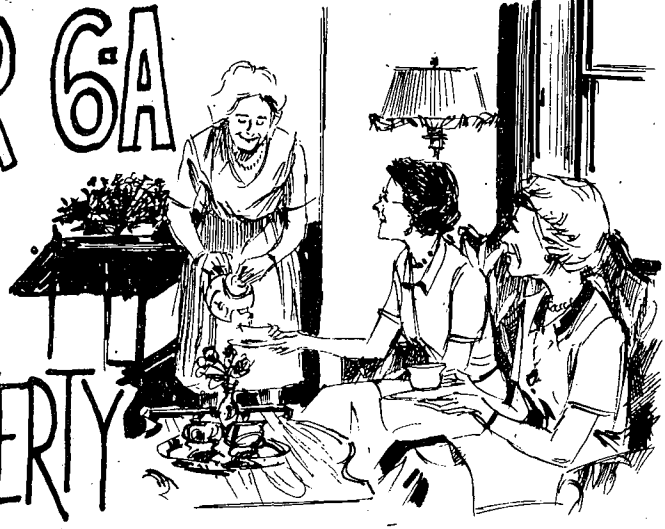
The only vacancy created in the building was when someone was carried out feet first . . .

A NEW TENANT FOR 6A

by S. S. RAFFERTY



The Chomley Towers was an anachronism amid the luxury highrise apartment houses that proliferated throughout the Upper East Side like so many beanstalks sown from magical postwar profits and bad taste in architecture. Chomley Towers had been erected in 1929, an unfortunate year for rentals—or anything, for that matter. But the market crash had some good side effects, for prospective tenants were able to negotiate favorable leases that were later strengthened by rent-control laws after

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World War II. This happenstance of economy and history accounted for Chomley Towers being populated, for the most part, by the original tenants.

As Mickey the doorman was in the habit of telling weekend apartment-hunters, "The only vacancy created in this here building is when someone is carried out in a coffin."

As time took its toll, a number of undertakers had passed through the marbled lobby on their business, and a number of younger couples moved in—young marrieds (though if they were married, why were there so many double names on the mailboxes?) who played hi-fis too loudly and weren't very neat about the garbage chute or the laundry room.

With these appalling conditions slowly creeping over the building, it was no wonder that the tenants of the sixth floor were greatly concerned at the passing of Mrs. Dora Kensington in 6-A. The three other widows who shared the common elevator foyer were, of course, grieved over Dora's death, but intrigued nevertheless with the question: Who would move into 6-A? The ladies decided to have a meeting in 6-B, with Mrs. Cornelia Fitzbow as hostess and chairlady. Present were Mrs. Phoebe Darlington-Thews from 6-C and Mrs. India Ann Crawford of 6-D. The ladies had known each other as neighbors for 46 years and, as each of their spouses died, they had become close friends. So close, in fact, that they went to the same hairdresser, the same dress shops, and the same restaurants, which eventually gave them the appearance of aging triplets.

Cornelia Fitzbow, whose husband had been the president of his own company and therefore had presumably imparted some executive skills to his widow, took command of the meeting.

"We should rent it ourselves," she said, pouring tea.

"With what, dear?" Phoebe Darlington-Thews asked with some shock. Her husband had been chief cashier of a bank, and she was critically aware of inflation's appalling erosion on trust funds.

"We could chip in," Cornelia said, passing the cups and saucers. She was using the newer Spode these days, since the part-time maid broke three handles off the antique Limoges.

"Well, I know my Mr. Cramer wouldn't allow it." India Ann Crawford was referring to the trust officer who managed her account at the bank. Since her husband died fifteen years before, Mr. Cramer had become the authority figure in her life.

"Nor would my Mr. Nagler," rejoined Phoebe Darlington-Thews.

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Somehow, Mr. Fitzbow had died intestate, and Cornelia had control of her own money.

"Well then, what are we going to do?" Cornelia asked with desperation. "The management of the building certainly won't give us final approval of the new tenants."

India Ann bit into a Chiltonian finger biscuit. "I don't think we can really do anything at all," she said. "We'll just have to depend on the luck of the drawer."

"Draw, dear," Phoebe corrected. "But she's right, Cornelia. We're at their mercy. We can only pray we get a nice quiet couple—a lawyer or an executive."

"A doctor would be ideal," India Ann said. "That poor Dr. Morgan is run ragged." Dr. John Morgan and his wife lived in 5-C, and although none of the tenants in the building was an official patient he was the one they called during nighttime emergencies. He once remarked to his wife, Shirley, that he should buy a practice in Kansas, so that he could get a full night's sleep.

"As long as it's not a musician," India Ann continued. "Angela Decker in 3-A has one next door, and he must be practically deaf the way he plays his Victrola."

"As you said, we'll just have to trust to the luck of the draw," their hostess sighed and poured more tea.

They hadn't long to wait. Two days later, furniture was moved into 6-A. The ladies were very busy going to and from each other's apartments. A general air of relief took hold as the quality of the furniture was assessed. Some of the pieces, in fact most of them, were tastefully selected antiques. With this evidence, the ladies conjectured that their new neighbors were people of refinement.

Cornelia Fitzbow took the initiative and asked one of the moving men if he knew the new tenant's name. "Squill," he told her after checking his bill of lading. "Chauncey Squill of Greenwich, Connecticut."

That night, at their weekly night-out dinner at Schrafft's, the ladies bubbled with curiosity.

"Probably a nice couple whose children have grown up and moved away, and they're giving up their home in the country," Phoebe Darlington-Thews proffered.

"Oh, that means grandchildren visiting at Christmas," India Ann Crawford cooed. "How nice."

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For various reasons, none of the ladies on the sixth floor ever had children. At Christmas and other holidays, they celebrated together. In a sense, they had become a family out of friendship and need. Tomás, the building handyman, referred to them as the Three Musketeers. (He had called them the Four Musketeers until Dora Kensington's death.)

"You realize Mrs. Chauncey Squill may be a widowed woman like ourselves." Cornelia Fitzbow was always the most realistic of the group.

"Well, if she's nice, all the better," India Ann mused. "We've needed a fourth for bridge since poor Dora passed on."

The next day, the new tenant arrived, bag and baggage. To the group's surprise, the new occupant was neither a couple nor a widow, but a dapper silver-haired gentleman in his late sixties. Actually, he gave the impression of being much younger, due to his trim body and bouncy nature. He was quite friendly and readily accepted an invitation to tea with his new neighbors.

Mr. Chauncey Squill was a retired button manufacturer whose wife had died the previous winter. Her passing did not seem to grieve him much. "My philosophy, my dears, is that all a person can ask of life is birth, death, and a few chuckles in between."

They thought him delightful. He was a peerless raconteur, a thorough gentleman, and a wonderful companion. Then, during the second week of his tenancy, Cornelia Fitzbow expressed the thought that they invite him to Phoebe Darlington-Thews' birthday party, which was to be held this year at India Ann Crawford's apartment. "After all, he is one of the group, in a way."

"Of course," India Ann agreed.

"Oh, but I forgot to tell you," Mrs. Phoebe Darlington-Thews said. "I won't be here on my birthday."

"Where will you be?" Cornelia asked. "You've been here for the past twelve years, and we've always had a birthday party for you."

"I'm going out to dinner and the theater."

Her friends looked at her in shock.

"You don't go out alone at night, Phoebe, and you know it."

"I won't be alone. Mr. Squill invited me out, and I've accepted his invitation."

"Mr. Squill!" shouted Mrs. Fitzbow.

"Dinner and the theater!" India Ann gulped.

"Well, I certainly don't see any harm in it," Phoebe said not so much

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in defense as with an air of assertiveness. "It isn't as if I'm so old! After all, I *am* the youngest."

That announcement put a chill in the air of the sixth floor. The day after her birthday, Phoebe was rather vague, almost superior, in describing her evening. Things worsened three days later when India Ann became the center of Mr. Squill's attention. He took her to the opera and on to a champagne supper. Within a month's time, he had squired each of the ladies to one function or another, but always individually.

At one point, India Ann was not talking to Phoebe because she had deliberately baked Mr. Squill a chocolate cake *only* after India Ann had remarked that it was his favorite. At the same time, Cornelia was not talking to India Ann, who had insisted on being the first to go to the lobby each morning to pick up Mr. Squill's mail for him after she, Cornelia, had the idea first—although she had never expressed it. The group's tea parties grew fewer in number, and the dinner night out at Schrafft's was terminated completely.

The coolness turned to hostility when India Ann sprained her wrist after a fall over an ottoman one night in the dark. She insisted that Phoebe or Cornelia, who both had keys to her apartment, had deliberately tried to kill her by sneaking in and moving the ottoman.

"That ottoman has been in front of the easy chair in the selfsame spot for ten years," she told the detectives who had responded to her "attempted homicide" call, "but last night, it was directly in front of the dining-room doorway. Both those women know I always walk around at night and never turn on the lights. I don't have to—I know this apartment like the back of my hand."

She was further incensed at the policeman's suggestion that she was absent-minded. She *had not* moved the ottoman herself and forgotten about it. India Ann knew she had a memory like an elephant, and no fellow who, by her lights, looked too young to be a detective was going to tell her otherwise.

But there was no investigation, no trial, no conviction and sentence to the electric chair, and India demanded her keys back from her friends. In fact, they all returned the extra keys they had held to each other's doors for the past several years.

During her convalescence, Mr. Squill brought India Ann candy, flowers, and a monumental basket of fruit. He also took Mrs. Darlington-Thews to dinner and, later in the week, escorted Mrs. Fitzbow, but only

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to a movie, not dinner; not even coffee after the show.

Mr. Chauncey Squill was found dead in his bed two days later by the part-time cleaning woman, who summoned Dr. Morgan.

Unable to avoid the Hippocratic oath, Dr. Morgan responded, even though it was his day off. There were pills on the night table which he recognized as a drug prescribed for heart ailments. He called the Dr. O'Keefe whose name was on the medicine vial, who confirmed that he had been treating Mr. Squill for heart disease for several years. "I was afraid of this," O'Keefe said. "His EKG was irregular when he was in a few days ago."

"Do you want to come over?" Dr. Morgan asked.

"Could you do me the favor, Morgan? Sign the death certificate like a good fellow? It would save me a trip uptown."

"Sure. There's a phone index here, and he seems to have relatives in the city. I'll call them."

Mr. Squill was cremated on a Thursday, and his three neighbors attended the funeral services. They arrived in separate cabs, but traffic was so bad afterward that they were forced to share a taxi on the return trip. As they rode home, their former coolness warmed a bit, and by the time they stepped into the foyer on the sixth floor Mrs. Fitzbow had invited everyone in for tea. They engaged in small talk for a while and then got into a more intimate discussion about African violets, a subject on which Phoebe Darlington-Thews was undisputed expert.

"Well, you've got to come over and look at mine, Phoebe dear," India Ann Crawford said, patting her old friend's hand.

"India, I know you've been overwatering again. I'll never be able to break you of that naughty habit."

"You know, girls," Cornelia Fitzbow said from behind her tea service, "funerals are so depressing. Why don't we all go out tonight for dinner?"

"That's a wonderful idea," India Ann chirped. "And let's order some wine."

That same evening, Dr. Morgan and his wife were also going out to dinner, and they all met in the lobby and exchanged pleasantries. When the ladies had disappeared in a taxi, Shirley Morgan looked at her husband.

"They're really something. The Three Musketeers. Did you know there was a rumor going around the building that they were all sweet on that

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old gentleman you attended the other day?"

Dr. Morgan chuckled. "What? Do you think one of them killed him because he dropped her for one of the others?"

"Would those heart pills kill him if he were overdosed?"

"Come on, honey, don't be melodramatic."

"Well, could they? Could an overdose kill him?"

"Well." He hesitated. "Yes, but it's preposterous. He had a very bad heart condition, it's just natural to assume . . ."

"Was there an autopsy?"

"No, there was no need for one. He was under a doctor's care."

"There you have it. Now the body's cremated, so no one will ever know."

"Shirley, do you know how absurd it would be to suggest that one of those ladies would commit murder to avoid being jilted?"

"Who said anything about jilted? If you knew anything about women, you would see that he was a disruptive force in their long friendship. There are times, my darling, when women put friendship and affection for each other above having a man around. Especially at their age. I wonder which one did it."

"For heaven's sake, Shirley, stop it. No one killed him. Period."

"Well," she chided him, "with no autopsy, you'll never know. Someone might have committed a perfect murder, and you'd be an accessory."

"Me!"

"Certainly, darling. *You* signed the death certificate."

"Come to think of it," he said to himself almost inaudibly, "I've signed several death certificates in this building." His voice grew firmer. "Shirley, we definitely have to move!"

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He was sure he had discovered worse than an overdue library book . . .

THE JACK O'NEAL AFFAIR

by JAMES HOLDING

You'd think that chasing down missing and overdue books for the public library would be pretty dull and unexciting work, wouldn't you? Most of the time, it is. But occasionally my job gets me into situations that are very far from dull and unexciting, believe me.

Like the Jack O'Neal affair.

It started off like any other call to collect an overdue book. The address was 1218 King Street. King Street's in the East End, a couple of

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blocks south of the Crossroads intersection, in a still-decent but deteriorating neighborhood of sixty-year-old houses. Number 1218 seemed to be better cared for than the houses that flanked it on either side. Its small lawn was neat and close-cropped and the house had been freshly painted quite recently.

I parked my car at the curb, walked up the short cemented driveway to the house, and rang the bell. A white-haired, pleasant-faced woman answered the door.

I said, "Is this the O'Neal residence?"

She gave me a big smile and said, "Yes, it is," and waited for me to explain myself.

"I'm Hal Johnson from the public library, Mrs. O'Neal." I showed her my identification card. "I've come to collect an overdue library book that was borrowed five and a half weeks ago by John C. O'Neal. Is that your husband?"

She shook her head. "My son," she said. "Jack. I'm sorry, but he's not here right now, Mr. Johnson. He's at work." Then she added with a note of pride, "He's a city fireman, you know."

"Oh," I said, "that's what I wanted to be when I was a kid. A fireman. I never made it, though. I—".

She interrupted me. "Yes, Jack's a fireman. And he really loves the job. It's his whole world, really. He never showed the slightest interest in getting married or anything like that, can you believe it? He mopes and sulks around here every Friday—that's his day off—as though he'd much rather be working down at the firehouse. But you *can't* work seven days a week, I tell him, you have to have free time."

"I need all the free time I can get," I said, trying to head off any further comment about John O'Neal the fireman. "For instance, if you could just give me your son's overdue library book, Mrs. O'Neal, I wouldn't have to make another trip out here for it. You son has forgotten that he has the book, I suppose, although we did send him a postcard reminding him it's overdue."

Mrs. O'Neal stepped back and held the door open wider. "Oh," she said, flustered and apologetic, "please come in, Mr. Johnson. I'll see if I can find it for you. Jack would forget his head if it wasn't fastened on."

I followed her into a living room that was as neat and manicured as the lawn outside. An expensive television set stood in one corner, next

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to a built-in bookcase. Avocado shag carpeting stretched from wall to wall. The overstuffed sofa and easy chairs wore tasteful slipcovers in harmonizing prints. The lampshades looked almost new.

"What's the name of the book?" Mrs. O'Neal asked.

I consulted my list. "*War and Peace* by Tolstoy."

"Sit down for a minute," Mrs. O'Neal said. "I'll see if it's in Jack's bedroom upstairs. That's where he usually does his reading." Her voice faded as she ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Instead of sitting down, I wandered over to the bookcase beside the TV set and scanned the titles on the shelves, thinking that Jack O'Neal might have absent-mindedly stowed *War and Peace* there after he finished reading it.

War and Peace wasn't there. As I turned away, an outsize scrapbook lying horizontally on top of the books on the bottom shelf caught my eye. It had the word FIRES lovingly hand-lettered on its cover in old English script. Evidently the work of Jack O'Neal, the fireman who loved his work.

Idly I picked up the scrapbook and leafed through it while I waited for Mrs. O'Neal to return with *War and Peace*.

FIRES was an apt title. The scrapbook contained nothing but clippings from local newspapers describing a number of newsworthy fires that had occurred over the past few years in the city. The newspaper articles were illustrated with photographs of the fires in progress and of the smoking ruins afterward. Most of the fires in the book—only half a dozen—I remembered reading about. A furniture warehouse. The fancy home of a local lawyer. A dry-goods store. A tenement. An Italian restaurant on the North Side that had once been famous for its gnocchi. A florist's warehouse on City Line.

I heard Mrs. O'Neal's thumping footsteps descending the carpeted stairs and returned the scrapbook to its place in the bookcase, thinking it was only to be expected that a fireman who loved his work as much as Jack O'Neal evidently did would keep a record of his most dramatic encounters with the enemy. Personally, I was very glad that I hadn't realized my boyhood dream of becoming a fireman, although it was bad enough to have become a cop. A sissy library cop at that.

"I found it," Mrs. O'Neal said, handing me the overdue copy of *War and Peace*. "My, it's a long book, isn't it? Maybe Jack hasn't finished it yet. He isn't a fast reader." She shook her head fondly. "But I expect

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he really just forgot about it, as you say. It was on the floor by his bed, out of sight under the telephone stand."

"If he hasn't finished reading it," I said, "he can borrow it again the next time he comes to the library. So far, he owes us a small fine on it, Mrs. O'Neal. Do you want to take care of that for him?"

"Of course." She went into the kitchen and reappeared with her purse. "How much is it?"

I told her and she counted out the exact change. "I'm sorry Jack's caused you so much trouble, Mr. Johnson. He's so forgetful." She laughed indulgently. "He even writes notes to himself to help him remember things."

"I do that myself." I smiled at her, holding up my penciled list of overdues. "Thanks, Mrs. O'Neal."

I bid her goodbye, put *War and Peace* under my arm, and went down the driveway to my car.

Three days later, I dropped into police headquarters downtown. Since I'd worked there for five years as a homicide detective before switching to library cop, I knew my way around. I climbed the stairs to the gloomy cramped office of Lieutenant Randall, my former boss, and entered without knocking.

Randall was in the act of lighting one of his vicious black stogies, in blatant disregard of the Surgeon General's warnings. He held the flaring match in midair and gave me a dirty look out of his sulphur-colored eyes. "Well, look who's here," he greeted me without enthusiasm. "The famous book detective himself."

"Hi, Lieutenant," I said and sat down without being asked.

Randall puffed on his stogie till it was well alight, then waved out the match. "What do *you* want? And make it quick, Hal. I'm busy."

"Yeah," I said. "I can see that." There wasn't a paper of any kind on his desk.

"What do you want?"

"I'm a public-spirited citizen," I answered. "And as a public-spirited citizen with the community's good at heart, I have come here this morning to help you clean up some unsolved crimes." I gave him my public-spirited grin.

He gave me his you've-got-just-one-more-minute grin. "*You* can help *me*?" he asked. "How?"

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"By bringing to your attention a couple of murders you completely missed last year. And by pointing out the murderer to you."

Randall snorted, peering unblinkingly at me through a cloud of rank tobacco smoke. "How careless of me to miss a couple of murders," he said blandly. "What were they?"

"Two derelicts," I said, "who had sneaked in out of the freezing weather last November to sleep in an empty building. At least that's what the newspapers called them. Derelicts."

Randall came to attention. "You mean the bums who were burned to death in that empty Ross Street tenement?"

"Yeah," I said.

"They weren't murdered. They were trespassing in a building that happened to catch fire and incinerate them."

I shook my head. "I don't think the building happened to catch fire. I believe somebody deliberately put the torch to it."

"Arson?" He was patronizing.

I nodded. "And murder." He didn't say anything so I went on. "Even if the arsonist didn't know the bums were holed up inside when he set fire to the building, he's their murderer all the same, isn't he?"

"If there *was* an arsonist, yes. Nobody has ever suggested that there was one, though," Randall sighed, "except you."

"I'm ninety-nine-percent sure that there was, Lieutenant. Do you want to get Sandy Castle up here to hear the rest of this?" Sandy Castle heads up the Department's arson squad.

In the old days, when I worked for him, if I was ninety-nine-percent sure about anything, that was usually enough to convince Randall, and it still was, I guess. He picked up the phone and called Sandy.

While we were waiting, the Lieutenant smoked in noncommittal silence for about three minutes. Then he asked casually, "And who was this murderer, Hal? You said you knew."

I replied with equal casualness, "A city fireman named Jack O'Neal."

That shook him a little. "A fireman? For God's sake!"

"Ironic, isn't it?"

The door opened and Sandy Castle came in and took the other chair. "How are you doing, Hal?" he greeted me. "Back at the old stand?"

"Only temporarily. I've got something I think will interest you, Sandy."

"So I hear. I'm listening."

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I quickly filled him in on what I'd told Randall. "I think that tenement fire was set," I finished.

"He even claims to know who set it," Randall murmured. "Don't ask me how."

"You want it from the beginning?" I said. "O.K. Last Wednesday I went to collect an overdue library book from a city fireman named Jack O'Neal, who lives with his mother at 1218 King Street. Jack wasn't home, but his mother found the library book for me—on the floor under the telephone extension beside the bed in Jack's upstairs bedroom. While she was upstairs looking for the book, I came across a scrapbook in the living room and glanced through it while I waited. The scrapbook had the word FIRES on the cover, and contained six illustrated newspaper clippings about local fires. The Ross Street tenement fire was one of them."

Castle looked puzzled. "Nothing funny about that, Hal. A fireman could keep a scrapbook of fires like a writer keeps a scrapbook of reviews. I've personally known a dozen—"

I held up a hand. "Wait a minute, Sandy. I'm not finished."

"Let him talk," Randall interjected. "He loves to talk."

"There were only six clippings in the scrapbook, Sandy. The fires were spread over a period of about three years. And we've had a lot more than six newsworthy fires in this town in the last three years, haven't we?"

"So what?" Castle still looked puzzled. "Your fireman Jack O'Neal just keeps clippings on the fires that *he* helped to fight. It's natural."

I shook my head. "That's what I thought at first too. Until I found out that Jack O'Neal works at Station 12 and Station 12 wasn't called for any of the fires in his scrapbook."

Castle said, "How the hell did you find *that* out?"

"A telephone call to O'Neal's mother. Reading O'Neal's fire clippings in the back issues of the papers. The fire companies involved in fighting each fire were mentioned. No Station 12. Don't you find that odd?"

"Maybe," Castle admitted. "You got anything else?"

"Yes. All the fires in O'Neal's scrapbook happened on a Friday."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Friday is O'Neal's day off."

They both looked at me as though I'd lost my mind. "You think that's significant, I take it," Castle said.

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I shrugged. "When taken in connection with some other suggestive items."

"Like what?" Randall said.

I said with false humility, "I know how you feel about library cops and library books, Lieutenant, so I hate to bring up the subject. However, I will this time because I think there's an interesting inference to be drawn from the books Jack O'Neal has been reading."

"Stop with the fancy talk," Randall grunted. "Just tell us."

"I'm trying to. The book I collected from O'Neal was *War and Peace*. Combined with what I saw in O'Neal's scrapbook, it gave me an idea. I looked up the titles of the books O'Neal has borrowed from the library since he got his card several years ago. There were only five of them, so I guess I have to believe his mother that he's a slow reader. Can you guess what the five books were?"

Randall said sardonically, "I can't wait to hear."

I ticked them off on my fingers. "*War and Peace. Gone With the Wind. The Life and Death of Joan of Arc. Slaughterhouse-Five. The Tower*. You see what I'm getting at?"

Randall looked blank.

Sandy Castle said, "Let me guess. I saw *War and Peace* on television. And *Gone With the Wind*. The books all have one thing in common, right? A big fire scene?"

"You amaze me, Sandy," I said. "But you're dead right. For his light reading at home, Jack O'Neal chooses books with graphic fire scenes in them. And his mother told me he's so nuts about his job that he wishes he could work seven days a week." I looked at them quizzically. "Wouldn't you say the man is definitely queer for fires?"

"Maybe," Castle conceded, "but that doesn't make him a torch, Hal."

"Granted."

"Nor a murderer," Lieutenant Randall put in. He fixed his yellow eyes on me and said, "Come on, Hal, what hard evidence do you have? You must have something better than this jazz you've been feeding us. You wouldn't have worked your dainty fingers to the bone reading all those newspaper clippings because of a mere passing suspicion. So what is it?"

"Let me ask you a question first. Didn't a big hardware store burn to the ground last Friday on the South Side?"

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"Sure. Bartlett's Hardware," Castle said promptly.

"And what was last Friday's date?"

"That's two questions," Castle said. "Last Friday was the eighteenth. Why?"

"Because I found a penciled note in O'Neal's overdue library book," I replied.

Randall pounced. "Saying what?"

"Saying, and I quote, 'O.K. Bart's 18th.' Which meant absolutely nothing to me until I read about the Bartlett fire in Saturday's paper."

Randall said brusquely, "Let's see it."

"The note? I can't. I threw it away. But that's what it said: 'O.K. Bart's 18th.' "

"Why didn't you tell us about this note right off, instead of going through all this other drivel?" Randall demanded testily.

My real reason was just to needle Randall. So I lied a little. "I wanted to give you the sequence and the coincidences just as I got them," I said sweetly. "So you'd be able to put together just as I finally did, all the little facts that seem to add up to one big fact: namely, that Jack O'Neal is an arsonist and a murderer." I turned to Sandy Castle. "Is there any suspicion of arson in the Bartlett fire?"

"Not so far. The investigation is still going on, Hal. The fire marshal is certain that the fire originated in a paint storage closet in the store's basement. Spontaneous combustion. And I'm inclined to think he's right."

"Was the owner of the hardware store in town last Friday?" I asked Castle.

"Bartlett?" He gave me a slanting look. "No. He was with his family at the seashore for the weekend. You're thinking alibi, aren't you, Hal?"

I shrugged. "Here's the list of the other fires in O'Neal's scrapbook." I handed it to him. "I wonder where the owners of those buildings were when their property burned."

"I'll check," said Castle.

Lieutenant Randall's mind began to click, smooth and easy and well oiled as usual. I could almost hear it. He said, "This note was in O'Neal's library book, you say, which his mother found beside his bed. Did you say there was a telephone extension beside his bed?"

"That's what his mother told me."

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He nodded. "So you figured somebody phoned O'Neal to torch Bartlett's store last Friday, and O'Neal wrote down the instructions and put them in his library book."

"I think that's what happened. O'Neal's mother said Jack had such a rotten memory he often wrote notes to himself as reminders."

Castle said slowly and heavily, "My department runs into a dozen wild-eyed nuts a year who get their jollies out of fires instead of sex or drugs. They usually act on their own, though, and on impulse, setting fires indiscriminately. This O'Neal of yours, if you're right about him, isn't like that. He's torching buildings to *order* on certain specified dates."

"Ah," I said. "Now you've got it. But to whose order? That's the question."

Randall broke in. "Thanks for the tip, Hal," he said, rising from his battered swivel chair and crushing out his stogie in his ashtray. "We'll take it from here."

"Good," I said, standing up too. "Don't be too rough on O'Neal's mother if you can help it, O.K.? And let me know how you come out, will you? I'm keeping a scrapbook of my own."

"On what?" asked Castle.

"On the crimes I solve for Lieutenant Randall," I said.

The newspapers called it the biggest arson racket in the history of the state. Thirteen of our local citizens, including merchants, property owners, a lawyer, a real-estate agent, a fire marshal, and, of course, Mrs. O'Neal's son Jack, were ultimately tried and convicted on charges of conspiring to burn property with the intent of defrauding insurance companies. When all the figures were in, they indicated that the arson ring cheated insurance companies of some half million dollars over a period of three years by having properties appraised at inflated values, overinsuring them, then burning the buildings down and filing fraudulent insurance claims.

"I'm sorry we have to go light on your boy O'Neal," Lieutenant Randall told me. "He's crazy as a bedbug when it comes to fires, Hal, just as you figured. But he's plenty smart in other ways. Smart enough to plea-bargain himself into a maximum ten-year term for his part in the arsons by agreeing to rat on everybody else in the ring."

"How did you nail him in the first place?" I asked. "Nothing I gave

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you was strong enough to prove he's a torch."

"Well," said Randall complacently, "we didn't have too much trouble. On the presumption that his note in your library book meant what you thought it did, we persuaded Judge Filmer to issue us a search warrant, and we went through O'Neal's home with a fine-tooth comb while he was at work. We turned up a couple of interesting items there."

"Besides his scrapbook?"

Randall nodded. "Yep. Item one: a diary that he kept locked in the drawer of his bedside telephone stand."

"How lucky can you get?" I said. "Don't tell me it mentioned the arson jobs?"

"It did. Twice. Sandrini's Florist warehouse. And Bartlett's Hardware. On the exact dates the fires occurred."

"What did the diary say about them?"

"*Handled S job today for TX.* And *Handled B job today for TX.*"

"That's pretty convicing. But not legal proof. Who's TX?"

"The lawyer whose fancy house burned down."

I remembered it now, the name I'd read in the newspaper clipping. "Thomas Xavier! Of course. How many people would have the initials TX?"

"Nobody else connected with *this* case anyway. Knowing that name gave us a little leverage when we braced O'Neal."

"Xavier is pretty important people," I ventured.

"Important enough to be the respectable front for the arson ring. The ringleader, in fact. He arranged the torching dates with the property owners, saw that they all had unshakable alibis, gave O'Neal his orders, and set up the insurance claims."

"Paymaster too?" I asked.

"Yeah. O'Neal says he got five thousand dollars from Xavier for every fire he set. We found his pay for the Bartlett job in O'Neal's locker at the firehouse."

"Five thousand a job. Not bad. What else did you find beside the diary?"

"A key." Randall paused ostentatiously to light a cigar. I sighed and asked the question he wanted.

"A key?"

"Yeah. A key to the rear delivery door of Bartlett's Hardware Store."

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"Bartlett's burned to the ground, including that door. How could you tell it was *that* key?"

"There was a little tag tied to it saying 'Rear door, Bartlett's.' " Randall's smile was smug.

I said, "My God, the guy must have *wanted* to be caught! Where'd you find the key?"

"In a pocket of the slacks his mother told us he wore on the eighteenth, his day off. The eighteenth, get it?"

"I get it. But it's still not enough to have made him sing. Everything against him is purely circumstantial."

"Not quite," said Randall. "As a matter of fact, we kind of implied that an off-duty fireman who knows O'Neal was smooching with his girl friend in a parked car behind Bartlett's store the night it caught fire. And that this fireman saw Jack O'Neal enter the store by the back door, disappear for a few minutes, then emerge and make tracks away from there just a little time before the fire broke out."

I clicked my tongue and gave the Lieutenant a shocked stare. "You mean you told him you had an eyewitness?"

"We didn't *tell* him exactly." Randall's tone was as bland as cream. "We merely suggested the possibility in a way that made Jack think it was true. *That*'s when he broke wide open."

"Well," I said, "congratulations, Lieutenant. I suppose you've got a solid case against each member of the ring?"

"Airtight." Randall's cat's eyes regarded me without blinking for a moment. Then he said, "I told O'Neal about your part in this mess, Hal. About the note you found in his library book that made you suspicious, and so on. And you know what he said?"

"No idea."

"He said he was sorry we'd caught up to him before he torched just one more building."

I played straight man again. "What building?"

"The public library," said Lieutenant Randall, "with you in it."

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No one's privacy was safe from the Honorable Constance . . .

A CASE OF MALICIOUS MISCHIEF

by JOYCE PORTER

Miss Jones straightened a spoon on the breakfast table and glanced anxiously at the clock. Nearly ten past eight—and it was so unlike dear Constance to be late for meals. Miss Jones moved the sugar bowl. She'd known this early-morning jogging was a mistake. You never knew what might not happen, even in Totterbridge. There could have been a road accident or a mugging or dear Constance could have been accosted by one of these dreadful, licentious males and . . .

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It was the unthinkable that sent Miss Jones racing for the telephone. However, before she'd managed to dial more than one of the three nines, her affectionate ear caught the welcome sound of footsteps pounding heavily up the garden path.

The front door crashed open and the little entrance hall at "Shangri-la," 14 Upper Waxwing Drive, was immediately over-filled with a single bulky, puffing, steaming figure. The Honorable Constance Morrison-Burke had returned home and—*pace* Miss Jones—it would have been a rash man who'd tried to stop her.

The Honorable Constance kicked off her running shoes and removed her anorak as worn by the Royal Navy Expedition to the Cairngorms in 1956. "Sorry to be tardy, old bean, but I've stumbled across a bit of a puzzle." She draped her khaki Balaclava helmet over the banister and strode into the dinette.

Miss Jones's sense of foreboding returned. "Have you, dear?"

The Honorable Constance was not an easy person to live with, endowed as she was with noble birth, pots of money, and boundless energy. One could say that the Hon. Con (as she was generally known) had a little too much of almost everything except a satisfactory outlet for her talents. Bullying Miss Jones was a poor substitute for the challenge of earning one's own living or even for the fun of tyrannizing a husband and family. Over the years the Hon. Con had turned her hand to a considerable number of pastimes, generally with traumatic results. Recently, though, when she wasn't teaching adult illiterates to read or preserving public rights-of-way through newly planted cornfields or having a bash at wrought-iron work, she rather fancied herself as a private detective. This wasn't quite the absorbing hobby that it might seem as the local police were somewhat loath to share their more intriguing cases with her and, in any case, the small town of Totterbridge could hardly be classified as a hotbed of crime. The Hon. Con, therefore, had rather got into the habit of scratching around as best she could and finding her own enigmas.

"It's that girl," explained the Hon. Con as she set about satisfying the inner man. "The one who's moved into the Quirkes' house."

Miss Jones stiffened. She wasn't jealous, of course, but she did wish dear Constance would refrain from taking such an avuncular interest in every pretty girl she clapped eyes on. "Miss Stockwell, you mean, dear?"

"That's her. Well, she's suddenly started having two pints of milk a day delivered instead of one."

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Miss Jones smiled indulgently. Dear Constance just wasn't the least bit domesticated. "She's probably making a custard, dear, or a blancmange."

The Hon. Con shook her head. "Three days running, Bones?"

"Maybe she's got somebody staying with her."

The Hon. Con shook her head again. "Nope. Had a bit of a chat with her yesterday in the post office. Pumped her a bit. Asked her if she didn't find it lonely being all by herself. She said she liked it. Said that's why she'd rented the Quirkes' house, for a bit of solitude. Got some work or something she wanted to get done."

"But there could be dozens of reasons for ordering extra milk, dear."

"She seems to be buying a heck of a lot of food too. She was staggering under her shopping yesterday. Well, I ask you—how much does a slip of a girl like that eat? Of course"—the Hon. Con stretched out an eager paw for the marmalade—"she seems to be a pretty heavy smoker, maybe that keeps her weight down."

"Oh, no!"

The words were out almost before Miss Jones realized it.

"She isn't. Or at least she shouldn't be. A smoker, I mean. You know how neurotic Mrs. Quirke is about fire. I'm sure she would never have let their house while they're away in Australia to anybody who smoked. It would have been the first question she'd ask any prospective tenant."

"The Stockwell girl," said the Hon. Con in a voice pregnant with meaning, "had a carton of two hundred. I saw it on top of her shopping basket with my own eyes." She took the last piece of toast. "We've got a mystery here, Bones! That wench has suddenly up and changed her entire lifestyle. It behooves me to find out why."

Somewhat later Miss Jones tried to inject a little elementary common sense into the proceedings. "But how do we know what her lifestyle is? After all, she's only been living in the Quirkes' house for about a week. She's really a total stranger, isn't she?"

"Precisely!" said the Hon. Con, gratified that Miss Jones had caught the drift so quickly. "She's a woman of mystery. A riddle. A puzzle. Which is why I intend investigating her. We'll keep her under surveillance twenty-four hours a day. We'll use your bedroom as the ops room because it's got a clear view of the Quirkes' place." The Hon. Con pushed back her chair. "It'll be handy for you too."

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"Will it, dear?" asked Miss Jones, rightly fearing the worst.

"I'll be doing the really tricky stuff on the day shift," explained the Hon. Con, looking very noble and self-sacrificing, "but I've got to have a bit of rest sometime. Fair's fair, eh?"

For two solid days the Hon. Con, armed with binoculars and notebook, stood watch behind the lace curtains in Miss Jones's bedroom. She took all her meals at the window and only deserted her post to go downstairs when there was something really good on the telly. Miss Jones, on the other hand, showed much less devotion to duty when it came to the night stint. In spite of the Hon. Con's protests, all Miss Jones would consent to was taking a quick peep out of the window at such times, if any, that she had to get out of bed.

At the end of the second day, the Hon. Con herself chucked in the towel. "It's no good," she announced. "We haven't spotted anything suspicious since we started. She's still getting two pints of milk a day though. Surely she can't be drinking it all."

"Perhaps she washes in it, dear."

The Hon. Con had a more lurid solution. "I reckon she's hiding somebody in that house."

"Do you mean a man, dear?"

"Who else?"

"Her—er—lover?"

"Be your age, Bones!" snorted the Hon. Con. "Nobody conceals lovers these days. They flaunt 'em! No, I was thinking more of a terrorist or something. You know, an I.R.A. chappie or somebody from that Palestinian lot."

Miss Jones didn't care for the sound of this at all. Not in Totterbridge. Not in Upper Waxwing Drive. Not foreigners.

"All right," said the Hon. Con obligingly, "how about an escaped convict? Or a kidnap victim? Or a master criminal on the run?"

Miss Jones shivered. "Does it have to be anything quite so unsavory, dear?"

"If it isn't," retorted the Hon. Con, who was well known for her clear thinking, "why all the blooming secrecy? Why go to all this trouble if there's nothing to hide?"

Miss Jones sighed and took her courage in both hands "You don't think you're perhaps making a mountain out of a molehill, dear?"

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"I could be, old girl," admitted the Hon. Con, bending over backwards to be reasonable. "Only one way to make sure."

Miss Jones had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being hoist with her own petard. "And what's that, dear?"

"Tackle the old neighbors!" said the Hon. Con with a grin as she leaned forward to switch the telly on. "You know what a bunch of Nosy Parkers they are around here. If there is anything fishy going on in the Quirkes' house, you can bet your boots the folks on either side of 'em will know it."

Had Mrs. Tams known that she was going to find the Hon. Con, smirking from ear to ear, on her doorstep, she wouldn't have answered the bell. "Jogging from London to Brighton?" she echoed incredulously as she tried not to accept the scruffy piece of paper the Hon. Con was thrusting at her.

"Thought you might care to sponsor me at so much a mile," explained the Hon. Con without a blush. She handed Mrs. Tams a pencil. "In aid of our Vanishing Wildlife." She watched as Mrs. Tams began reluctantly to add her name to the list of entirely fictitious patrons. "Er—anybody in next door?"

"I suppose so."

"I hear that young woman's a bit of hot stuff," said the Hon. Con, winking knowingly. "Bags of orgies, eh?"

Mrs. Tams's eyebrows rose in astonishment. "Not as far as I know."

"Oh, come on!" invited the Hon. jovially. "We're all adults. The way I hear it, she's got representatives of the opposite sex popping in and out all day long. Everybody's talking about it."

"Are they?"

The Hon. Con battled stoutly on. "Well, you know what kids are like these days. No more morals than tomcats."

Mrs. Tams handed back the paper and pencil and prepared, a mite too pointedly, to close her front door. "I don't think Miss Stockwell is like that at all. Mrs. Quirke would never have rented her the house if there'd been anything in the least bit loose about her."

The Hon. Con sighed dramatically. "But how can you tell, eh? They all look like blooming floozies, even the boys."

"She had references!" snapped Mrs. Tams, continuing the discussion against her better judgment. "One was from Miss Olive Affleck."

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"Affleck?"

"The Chief Constable's daughter," said Mrs. Tams triumphantly. "She would hardly have recommended a girl with the sort of dubious character you've been hinting at, would she?"

The door was closed with a firmness that fell just short of a slam.

The Hon. Con scowled. The Chief Constable's daughter hardly chimed in with the urban guerrillas and student revolutionaries that the Hon. Con had set her heart on. Still, she'd no intention of letting a little thing like that stand in the way of further investigation. Mrs. Tams had probably got it all wrong anyhow.

If there was one thing the Hon. Con was not short of, it was imagination. So when she called at the house on the other side of the Quirkes', she did so in the guise of a representative of The Methuselah Society doing a survey of the old and decrepit.

Mr. Poppleton, a hale and hearty fifty-year-old, misunderstood. "God damn it," he snarled, "you take a couple of bloody days off with a bloody sprained ankle and they send the bloody snoopers round! What do you want? A bloody doctor's certificate? All right, I'll bloody get one! I'll—"

The Hon. Con did think of trying to clarify the situation but decided not to bother. She waited until Mr. Poppleton paused for breath. "What about next door?"

"Next door? Which bloody next door? The Belchers or the Quirkes?"

"Isn't there some girl who's rented the Quirkes' house?"

"Ah, now—" Mr. Poppleton could hardly wait to put the boot in "—*there's* somebody you ought to be asking a few questions about—what's *she* living on, eh? Where does she get *her* money from? From the bloody Welfare, that's where, mate!"

"She doesn't work?" asked the Hon. Con, to whom it was all grist to the mill.

Mr. Poppleton laughed sardonically. "That'll be the bloody day!" he snorted. "They might knock a bit off my bloody Income Tax if she did, eh?"

"Maybe she's being kept by some man or other," said the Hon. Con, casting her bread optimistically on the waters.

"All women are bloody parasites!" proclaimed Mr. Poppleton, loudly enough for his wife to hear him. "Actually—" he lowered his voice and moved closer to the Hon. Con "—you may be onto something there, love. You're from the National Assistance, are you? Well, it wouldn't

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surprise me if that girl next door was cohabiting." He glanced around to see that he wasn't in danger of being overheard while he blew the gaff on his neighbor. "I reckon she's had a man in there! Straight up! God, old Mother Quirke'd go spare if she knew about it!"

"A man in there?" The Hon. Con might have gone weak at the knees if she hadn't despised such manifestations of feminine frailty.

Only too predictably, Mr. Poppleton began to hedge his bets. "Well, somebody," he amended feebly. "It could have been a woman, I suppose."

"You saw this person?"

Mr. Poppleton was beginning to wish he'd kept his mouth shut. "Well, not saw, exactly."

"*Heard*, then?" demanded the Hon. Con, who was, luckily, used to dealing with the inarticulateness of the lower classes. If you spoke loudly and clearly enough, they usually stopped hedging.

Well, yes, Mr. Poppleton had heard something. The day before yesterday it was. He'd managed to hobble down to his greenhouse on his sprained ankle, and he'd actually seen Miss Stockwell going out with her shopping basket. He'd said good afternoon to her because it doesn't pay to get at outs with your neighbors, no matter what sort of spongers and layabouts they were. "So I knew the house was empty," said Mr. Poppleton. "Or should have been."

"Then what?"

"Then I heard somebody up in the bathroom."

The Hon. Con scowled. "A tap running? Miss Stockwell might have forgotten to turn it off."

"Not a tap, exactly." Mr. Poppleton eyed the Hon. Con doubtfully. He wasn't quite sure how she was going to take this. "It was the loo."

"The loo?"

"That's right. Somebody flushed it. Just the once. It makes one hell of a row you can hear all over the bloody garden. I've spoken to old Quirke about it because it's damned embarrassing when we've got guests, but he says there's bloody all he can do about it."

The Hon. Con worked out her next moves with the sort of skill and dedication Napoleon had reserved for his major battles. She decided against a face-to-face confrontation with Miss Stockwell. It would only put the girl on her guard and, in the circumstances, the Hon. Con could

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hardly expect to get a straight answer to her questions. No, she must wait until Miss Stockwell again left the house and then nip round to make a searching investigation of the "empty" premises.

Miss Jones was turning out to be a very weak reed when, the next day, she was called upon to act as lookout after Miss Stockwell had gone off to the shops.

"But I *can't* whistle, dear!" she wailed as she took up her station by the Quirkes' front gate.

"Steaming rabbits, Bones!" exclaimed the Hon. Con impatiently, "I've got to have some warning if the Stockwell girl comes back before I'm finished! That, after all, is what you're blooming well standing here for."

"Maybe if I just coughed, dear?"

The Hon. Con sighed. Good grief, if Philip Marlowe or James Bond or Perry Mason had had to cope with collaborators like this . . . "All right, Bones," she agreed. "Cough. But do it loudly!"

In the event the Hon. Con's examination of the Quirkes' house didn't take more than five minutes. Most of the windows, even on the ground floor, were too high for her to see into and those that weren't were heavily guarded by lace curtains. She did manage to peer through the glass panels of the back door into the kitchen, only to be bitterly disappointed because everything looked normal. That left only one avenue to explore and the Hon. Con took a deep breath, clenched her fists, and flexed her knees.

But no matter how much she battered and kicked on the doors and no matter how loudly she bawled "Fire! Is there anybody at home? Open up in there, this is the police!" the Quirkes' house remained stubbornly unresponsive. The same could not be said for all the other houses on Upper Waxwing Drive. Their occupants came rushing in considerable alarm to see what was going on. It was Miss Jones, dying a thousand deaths of shame and mortification, who had to bear the brunt of their curious stares and caustic comments. The neighbors were used to the Hon. Con, of course, but even they were finding her current goings-on more than a little bizarre.

When her throat was sore, her knuckles bruised, and the toe caps of her brogues damaged beyond repair, the Hon. Con packed it in. If there was anybody inside the Quirkes' house, they weren't answering.

"What now, dear?" panted Miss Jones as she scurried after the Hon. Con and tried not to see all the inquisitive, pitying eyes.

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The Hon. Con was enveloped in a cloud of deep disgust. "It's back to the old drawing board, Bones," she said, turning up the path of "Shangri-la" and, in a last gallant gesture of defiance, kicking open her own front door.

It was, indeed, a time for ice packs and black coffee. The Hon. Con, however, was not stumped for long.

"The way I see it, Bones," she said when sheer, brilliant inspiration had finally dawned, "there definitely is somebody concealed in that house. I think we can take old Poppleton's evidence on that point as pretty conclusive."

Miss Jones pursed her lips. She had always thought that Mr. Poppleton was a very common sort of man.

"We can also take it as conclusive," the Hon. Con went on, "that X, as I shall now call him, is there of his own free will. If he wasn't, he would have responded to my knocking and offers of rescue—right?"

"I suppose he might have been bound hand and foot, dear," ventured Miss Jones. "And gagged too."

"And incarcerated in the bathroom?" queried the Hon. Con with withering sarcasm. "Besides, a child of two could get out of that house, or at least break a window or something. To say nothing of the telephone."

"Maybe the phone's been disconnected." In her anxiety to prevent dear Constance from making even more of a public spectacle of herself, Miss Jones was really thinking quite constructively.

The Hon. Con, however, as befitted her role of Great Detective, was still one jump ahead. "I tried it this morning as soon as the Stockwell girl left the house. It was ringing quite normally, and nobody answered it. So I'm scrubbing the theory that X is a kidnap victim. That leaves us with some sort of criminal—probably a terrorist."

"Oh, dear," whimpered Miss Jones, rightly appalled at the prospect of being bombed in her bed or sprayed with bullets as she popped down to the corner shop for a loaf.

"However—" the Hon. Con was beaming cheerfully "—I intend to pay a call upon the Chief Constable."

Miss Jones sagged with relief. "Oh, how very wise, dear. After all, it *is* a job for the police and—"

"I'm not going to the Chief Constable for help, Bones!" The Hon. Con chuckled mightily at such a ludicrous idea. "I'm going to have a chat with his daughter."

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"Oh," said Miss Jones as the penny dropped. "It was Miss Affleck who gave a reference for Miss Stockwell when she rented the house, wasn't it?"

"It's my only remaining lead," said the Hon. Con. "I'm counting on Olive Affleck to put me bang in the picture."

"Do you know her, dear?" Miss Jones was a trifle old-fashioned when it came to paying calls on people to whom one hadn't been introduced.

"Never clapped eyes on the lass!" boomed the Hon. Con happily. "But I expect she'll know me all right."

Since chief constables are no longer retired army officers or hard-hunting country gentlemen brought in to give the police a bit of tone, the Hon. Con didn't bother tarting herself up in a skirt for her visit. Her second-best cavalry-twill trousers and her World War II duffle coat were more than good enough for the Afflecks, she reckoned. She was therefore slightly disgruntled to find that the Afflecks appeared to live in considerable splendor and that their house, standing in its own spacious grounds on the outskirts of Totterbridge, was large and elegant.

The Hon. Con rang the front doorbell, musing sourly that it was all right for some. An anxious-looking dark-skinned girl in a maid's uniform opened the door and responded to the Hon. Con's perfectly innocuous request to speak with Miss Olive Affleck by starting back in horror, clutching desperately at her heart, and bursting forth in a stream of gibberish in a foreign tongue.

Even the Hon. Con was taken aback.

Not that Mrs. Affleck, English to the backbone, was much of an improvement when, a moment or two later, she replaced her hysterical domestic on the doorstep.

"You were asking for my daughter?" she inquired distantly. "I'm afraid she's away at the moment. Perhaps you could call back later—in a month or six weeks, say?"

And with that she closed the door very emphatically in the Hon. Con's face.

Miss Jones was not entirely displeased that her friend's plans had come to naught. "I shouldn't let it upset you, dear," she advised soothingly. "I've heard that Mrs. Affleck's got a rather brusque manner. Of course, it's her money, you know."

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"What is?" asked the Hon. Con, her amour-propre still smarting.

Miss Jones smiled in gentle reproof at such unworldliness. "They could hardly afford to live in that style on a chief constable's salary, dear. Servants, three cars, a Swiss finishing school for the daughter, to say nothing of what Mrs. Affleck must spend on her clothes."

In less exhilarating times the Hon. Con would have gone haring off delightedly on the scent of possible police corruption, but now her sights remained firmly set on her primary target. "I think I shall just have to take the place by storm," she mused, purportedly to herself but loud enough for Miss Jones to hear.

"Oh, not the Quirkes' house, Constance!" squealed Miss Jones, telling herself it was no time to have one of her migraines. "Do you think that's wise?"

"No alternative. There's something fishy going on and it's my duty to get to the bottom of it."

"Wouldn't it be better to go to the police, dear?"

"They wouldn't listen. They never do."

"Well, why not just ask Miss Stockwell straight out?"

"And warn her that I'm hot on the trail? Use your brains, Bones!"

Miss Jones sighed and tried to reconcile herself to the awful. Meekly she asked what sort of thing the Hon. Con had in mind.

"Oh, something quite simple," said the Hon. Con reassuringly.

"Crude" might actually have been a better word for a scheme which involved Miss Jones keeping Miss Stockwell occupied at the front door while the Hon. Con effected an entry at the back.

Miss Jones was distressed to discover that she was to be an integral part of the Hon. Con's plans. "Wouldn't it be better for you just to break in while Miss Stockwell is out shopping?"

The Hon. Con didn't think so. "We can't be sure precisely how long she'll be away," she explained, rummaging through the tool box for something she could use as a jimmy. "On the other hand, with you on the job, we'll be able to time things to the second."

"Er—when were you thinking of—?"

"No time like the present!" said the Hon. Con, and thoughtfully weighed the chisel in her hand.

Unlike the Hon. Con, Miss Jones was not a master of disguise, nor was she exactly the world's best actor. It was not to be expected that her

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performance at the Quirkes' front door would be too impressive. She was, however, so naturally tearful, upset, incoherent, and confused that she managed to hold Miss Stockwell's attention quite long enough for the Hon. Con to go through her burglar routine at the back.

It took the Hon. Con less than a minute of poking and fiddling about to discover that the back door wasn't locked. Tut-tutting gently over the unbelievable fecklessness of the criminal classes, she pushed the door open with infinite care and poked her head around. Having done her homework properly, she was not surprised to find herself in the kitchen and she duly noted the door (closed) which led out into the hall and the service hatch which opened into the dining room. The kitchen was empty and the Hon. Con could hear Miss Jones's voice quite clearly as she nattered away nervously at the front door.

The Hon. Con prepared to advance, but first she cast a hawklike glance round the kitchen and was rewarded by finding her first real clue. Lying on the table was one of those handy little gadgets which punches out neat white letters on a strip of shiny, brightly colored sticky tape. Somebody—Miss Stockwell?—had been using the implement and had apparently been interrupted in mid-word.

The Hon. Con straightened out the curling length of tape and read the message. It could so easily have been something like EPSOM SALTS or INSTANT COFFEE, but it wasn't. It was PUT MONEY IN CARDBOARD GROCERY BOX AN

The Hon. Con read the words again, just to be sure. It *was* a kidnapping after all! She'd better get a move on. Old Bones couldn't be expected to hold the fort much longer, so before she ran out of steam the Hon. Con had to find and rescue the poor helpless victim who was being held prisoner in the house.

The Hon. Con eased open one of the double doors of the service hatch and took a quick peep into the dining room, just to make sure there was nobody there trussed up like a chicken with sticking plaster all over—

Jumping Jehosaphat!

The Hon. Con swallowed her gasp of surprise just in time. True there was nobody bound and gagged in a chair, but there was somebody in the dining room—a dark, indistinct figure, standing in the shadows behind the half-open door which led into the hall. He was listening, silent and tense, to the increasingly frantic conversation at the front door.

Somewhat like a meditative tortoise, the Hon. Con drew her head

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back into the kitchen and took stock of the situation. She hadn't anticipated having two bloodthirsty desperadoes to deal with. Now she was going to have to tackle both Miss Stockwell and this hefty-looking specimen lurking in the dining room.

The Hon. Con was nothing if not foolhardy to the point of imbecility. Arming herself with a large carving knife and a soup ladle—the only weapons she could find—she totally abandoned all semblance of rational behavior and once more poked her head through the service hatch.

"Hello there!" she said.

The consequence was out of all proportion to the innocuousness of the greeting.

The figure in the shadows let out a strangled yelp and rose at least a foot in the air. Then, dragging the dining-room door open wider, he made a run for it.

"Stop him, Bones!" roared the Hon. Con before plunging through the service hatch in hot pursuit.

By the time the fire brigade arrived on the scene, Miss Stockwell had also made her getaway. The house was completely empty. There were, so the policemen who'd also been summoned informed the Hon. Con, no kidnap victim and no indications of any criminal activities whatsoever.

"But what," asked the Hon. Con, not at her most impressive as some firemen pushed while others pulled, "about that strip of tape on the kitchen table?"

Ah yes, the policemen agreed, there was that. A practical joke, perhaps? Well, they'd look into it. Meantime, if Miss Morrison-Burke could sort of make herself a bit thinner, the firemen would probably have her out of the service hatch in no time.

Much later, the Hon. Con and Miss Jones sat drinking their hot milk by the sitting-room fire. After the excitements of the day, they were planning on having an early night, but the Hon. Con was still picking fretfully at the debacle.

"You should have interposed your body, Bones!" she grumbled for the umpteenth time.

"I did try, dear," said Miss Jones wearily. "But she was so much bigger and heavier than me, and it all happened so quickly."

The Hon. Con wriggled irritably. "And I do wish you'd stop talking

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about *her*!" she snapped. "It can't possibly have been Olive Affleck."

"I can assure you it was, dear!" said Miss Jones obstinately. "I saw her quite clearly just before she knocked me into the rosebed. She was wearing a trouser suit, of course. I suppose that's what made you think she was a man."

"Poppycock!" snarled the Hon. Con. "You don't even know Olive Affleck."

"I know her perfectly well by sight. I've seen her hundreds of times about town."

"You've never mentioned seeing her before."

"The matter has never arisen, dear."

No doubt there would have been a further exchange of acrimonious comments if just then there hadn't been a ring at the front door.

The Hon. Con glanced at the clock. It was ten-fifteen. "Give me the poker, Bones!"

But the Hon. Con was not called upon to repel intruders. The two very senior policemen who eventually followed her back into the sitting room were the embodiment of civility and urbanity.

"Just an informal visit," explained the bigger man, whose name the Hon. Con had not been meant to catch. "About that incident this afternoon. We don't intend to take any further action. Compliments of the Chief Constable."

The Hon. Con's eyes popped. "So it *was* Olive Affleck!" she yelped.

The bigger man managed a smile. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Miss. Just forget all about it, eh?"

"But there was a kidnapping!" protested the Hon. Con. "I saw the message on that sticky tape in the kitchen! I—" She paused as several pieces of the puzzle clicked revealingly into place. "It was a *fake* kidnapping, was it?" she questioned, almost in a whisper. "Olive Affleck was pretending to have been kidnapped to give her parents a fright or, more likely, to screw a hefty sum of money out of them."

The two senior policemen exchanged glances. The Chief Constable had told them to stamp on this, and to stamp on it pretty damned quick.

"That's it!" the Hon. Con went on. "Olive Affleck and this Stockwell girl were in it together. Stockwell rents the Quirkes' house—with Olive Affleck's assistance—and they use it as their base. That's where they send all the ransom notes from, and that's where Olive Affleck goes into hiding. Stone a crow!"

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"You've got a very vivid imagination, Miss."

But the Hon. Con was not to be stopped by cheap sarcasm. She turned to Miss Jones. "That's why they behaved so oddly at the Chief Constable's house when I asked to see Olive. They were terrified about the kidnapping business coming out and putting their daughter's life in jeopardy." She swung back to the boot-faced policemen.

"I'll bet the Chief Constable didn't even tell you! Kidnapping gangs always warn the families not to contact the police, don't they? What a super stunt! Holy smoke—" the Hon. Con struck her thigh in a resounding slap of triumph "—if it hadn't been for me spotting those extra bottles of milk, they'd have got clean away with it!"

The smaller of the two police officers intervened in tones that were less avuncular than he intended. "There's been no kidnapping, take my word for it."

"Perhaps not!" retorted the Hon. Con, now firing brilliantly on all cylinders. "But there *has* been an attempt to extort money with menaces, or obtain it by false pretences, at the very least. Chief Constable's daughter or not, you've got to bring charges!"

"If we do, Miss, they'll be against you!" The bigger policeman dropped all pretense of friendliness. "There's breaking and entering, for a start. Then there's damages to property—they had to chop that service hatch to pieces, didn't they?—to say nothing of spreading malicious rumors."

The Hon. Con swallowed. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Believe me! And since your friend here was involved, we could get you for conspiracy as well."

"Oh, dear!" moaned Miss Jones.

The two officers prepared to take their leave. "It's entirely up to you, Miss," said the bigger one ponderously. "One whiff of gossip in Totterbridge about either Miss Affleck or her girl friend, or even about the Quirkes' house, and we'll drop on you like a ton of ruddy bricks. Your life won't be worth living." He pointed a stubby finger at the Hon. Con's mouth. "So just keep it buttoned! Right?"

The Hon. Con was both a realist and a motorist. She nodded her head. "Right!" she said.

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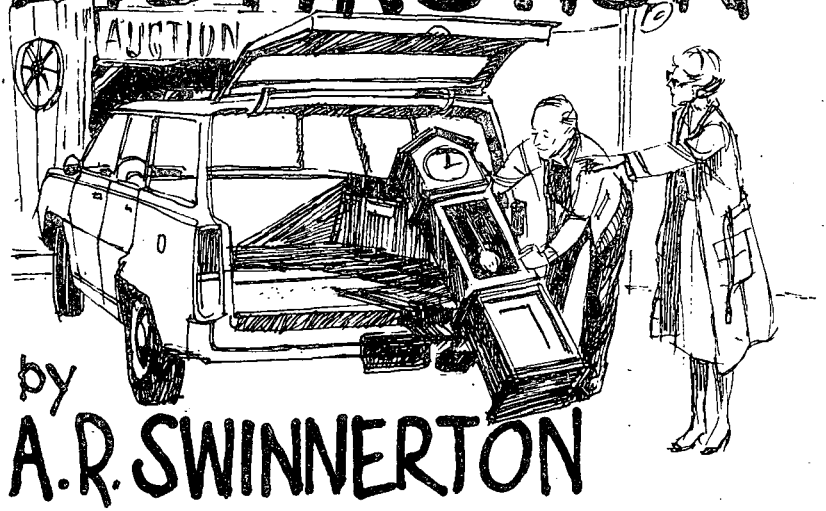
It was just like old times . . .

A MARK OF DISTINCTION



by A. R. SWINNERTON

The husky feminine voice was familiar.

"Edna!" he said, trying to sound pleased. "My God! How did you find—I mean, how are you?"

"Surviving, Larry. And you?"

"Same as always, kid. Still live by the same golden rule."

"I know. Never hit the same sucker twice. You're a conniving rascal. You should be behind bars."

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He chuckled. "Just came from one, Edna. And the last drink was in your direction, sweetie. Hey, we had some salubrious scams together, didn't we? Just like Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Make that Burns and Allen if it's all the same. And thanks, Lar."

"For what?"

"Leaving my share of the last one at the drop. Honor among thieves, sport."

"Split right down the middle, just like always. After expenses. Hey, wait a minute. You didn't think I'd—"

"It never crossed my mind. I mean, if a couple of old flea-flickers like us can't trust each other, what's this world coming to? How long's it been, Larry?"

"Too long, babe. Over a year. You're in town?"

"Far away, Larry. Are you onto something?"

"As a matter of fact," he fibbed, "I'm about to close, as the realtors put it."

"Some new little game?"

"Let's call it a variation on a theme from Haggard. Good to talk to you, Edna. One day soon we should split an ale."

"Wait, now. According to telephone etiquette, the caller says goodbye, not the callee. I've hustled up a mark for you. Everything right out of the good book, Larry. Rich enough, old enough. Mrs. Lonelyhearts herself. Loves antiques."

"So you thought of me, right?"

"Larry, you may look like an old crock, but you're a pro. When you're working you could pass for a reformed drunk, a kindly old retainer, or a church deacon—dealer's choice."

He chuckled. "They feel sorry for me."

"You're beautiful, Larry. They never even know what hits them. Are you interested?"

"We work together?"

"Only at the closing. Her name is Mrs. Ralph Breedlove—first name Millie. She's a war widow."

"Spanish-American?"

"A *little* younger. She loves auctions and antique sales, lives all alone in a big place. Write down this address and I'll mail you her picture. Don't ask me how I got it. Nice little town in Ohio—just your speed. Clean hotel, country music every Saturday night in the—shall we say

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lounge? Set yourself up with some cover, but don't call me."

He blew a smoke ring and stared at the small window across the room. The world was chock full of little old ladies in every city and town. They managed to outlive their husbands, but knew little about men and their devious ways, and could be the last of their breed what with the new generation of hard-eyed feminists working their way up the ladder. Maybe he'd better have another whack at it before the supply petered out.

"Yeah," he grunted. "And thanks, kid. Just like old times."

"More or less. See you—Bucky."

It was her own private little nickname for him, and he felt a pang of conscience. He had slickered countless trusting old biddies, separated them from their nest eggs without a qualm, walking away with nothing but pride in his *modus operandi*—but he never should have stiffed Edna. She'd trusted him, worked with him, and never suspected a thing. And here she was coming back for more. It was a crazy world.

At one time or another during his career, Larry had been Armand LeBeau, diamond importer; McGeorge Bayliss, stock broker and senior partner in the firm of Bayliss, Borkum and Rift; Jeremiah Turnbolt, Arizona land developer; Truman Hadden, fund raiser for worthy but nonexistent causes; as well as many roles he could recall only by referring to his private notes.

Sometimes he simply took an identity and wandered into the lady's life, ad-libbing as he went along. It usually worked. He enjoyed his work, relished changing his name and background, a privilege straight people could never enjoy. He was a performer on the broad stage of life itself, casting and directing his own little drama.

In his room at the Castile Hotel in Spartenburg he surveyed himself in the small mirror over the combination desk and dressing table. Carefully he pushed his thinning hair forward, slicking it over his bare pate. He hated the effect, but it was in character for Willard Moncrief, antique buyer from Chicago. For empathy, in case it was needed, he would be a widower still grieving for his wife who had died less than six months before. On Mother's Day yet.

It was Saturday afternoon. On the bed lay the local paper, listing two auctions. In his coat pocket was the picture Edna had sent him of the mark. He studied it carefully, first because she reminded him of some-

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one. He tried isolating her features, but nothing clicked. Eyes blue, hair a grey-coiffured wig, glasses with ear chains. The flesh under her eyes and jawbone was firm; she should have appeared younger, but her face offered that set, determined look that comes with about sixty years of living. She was about that, he figured.

Shaking his head, he snapped the picture with his finger and put it away. Time to go to work.

Looking for Hancock Street, he drove by an athletic field where a football game was in progress. He stopped to watch for a moment, musing philosophically that there was a time for planting, a time for reaping, and a time for hot-blooded young jockos to smack their heads together like mountain rams. Then he remembered the football widow who had stiff-armed him just as he was closing in and he hurried away.

He strolled around the first auction, watching with quiet amusement as fifty-cent ornamental plates and saucers went for five dollars and tasteless artware, the kind sold at novelty stores, brought outrageous bids, while an attractive armchair in need only of recovering sold for eight dollars.

Like sheep, the crowd followed the auctioneer. It wasn't until the larger pieces began to move that he spotted the widow Breedlove. Same wig, same fancy glasses, same tight little wrinkleless face, but she stood a bit taller than he had expected. "Genuine Swiss-movement solid walnut grandfather clock," droned the auctioneer: "If I was as rich as some of you folks, I'd have bought it myself. Beautiful—not a scratch on it. Any worthwhile bids?"

Larry glanced at the widow and raised his hand. "Fifty," he said.

She glared at him, her blue eyes snapping. "One hundred."

"Let the good bids roll," said the auctioneer. "I have a hundred. I hear one-fifty. Keep it moving."

"Two hundred," said Larry, his palms sweaty. He only had three hundred dollars in his pocket.

"Moving up out of the cheap seats," said the auctioneer, acknowledging a $250 bid. "Did you say three, lady?"

She nodded quickly. Larry rubbed his chin, smiling. "Make it three hundred dollars and my lunch money—fifty cents."

The crowd tittered. Mrs. Breedlove moved in a step. "Up it to three twenty-five," she said with a straight face. "The twenty-five dollars is *my* lunch money."

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Larry tipped his hat, accepting the laughter. "Outbid and outwitted," he said with a slight bow. "Let me help you carry it to your car. I'll take Grandfather's head and you take his feet."

They slid it carefully into the back of her station wagon. "My card," he said, dusting his hands. "Willard Moncrief, from Chicago. We deal mostly in glass and chinaware, but occasionally we branch out if the price is right. A shrewd buy, Mrs.—?"

"Breedlove." She held out her hand. "My goodness, I just lose my head when I see something precious like that."

Larry Haggard, alias Willard Moncrief, was already in character. He was a kindly, fumbling old gentleman, lonely and vulnerable, softening up a kindred soul to be swayed by his gallantry, to be set up deliberately and then, like a quarterback looking the other way, blind-sided. Business was business and worldly goods must change hands in response to the inexorable laws of economics.

Closing the tailgate, he glanced at her. Had he met her before in another scam, or had the faces of his victims all become one?

"May I ask," he said, "have you ever visited the city of Chicago, Mrs. Breedlove? Or its environs?"

She smiled, raising a finger, "Once," she said. "With Ralph, before he passed away. He was gassed during the shooting of an army training film. It left him with weak lungs. Anyway, we stayed at the Palmer House. We had a suite, I'll have you know. It—it was our last trip together."

He put a hand on her arm. "I'm always putting my clumsy foot in my mouth," he apologized. "First my bid cost you something, and now I've revived memories you'd sooner forget. The very least I can do is help you unload the clock and carry it into the house."

"Nonsense," she said. "That's what auctions are all about. I'm sure I can find someone—"

"You have," he said, patting her shoulder. "It's no trouble, not one bit. I'll follow you home, and we'll set up Grandfather in a spot befitting his dignity."

He watched her pull away. She waved, made her boulevard stop at the foot of the street, then turned left. He followed, wondering which of his prying tools would be best suited to start the cash flow. He would play this one by ear. Everything considered, she looked like a choice mark.

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At the stop sign, he turned and followed the clock.

Edna called at six. Same husky voice, same little buzz in his conscience.

"Willard," she said, "how's it going?"

First the buzz, then suspicion. "How did you know how I'm registered?"

She laughed. "I asked the clerk if a doddering old gentleman from Chicago had checked in recently. Said he was my uncle who had wandered away from the rest home. Did you meet the lady?"

"You might say that. This afternoon, not two hours ago, I wound her clock."

"Willard! You didn't! In broad daylight?"

"Never mind. Where are you calling from?"

"Toledo. Don't worry, my tab. How does it look, Willard, at ground level?"

"She must be loaded, Edna. A three-story mansion loaded with antiques, oil paintings, ornamental stuff. It'll fill a van, kid."

"Did you spot a wall safe?"

"No, but there's got to be one."

"What's your angle?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. She's a sweet-faced old biddy, kind of attractive in a fussy way. If it weren't for her squeaky voice I might sweep her off her high-button shoes, wive her in a quiet ceremony, then take a grand tour of the world."

"Easy, old boy. Love at first sight could be quicksand for an old buzzard wearing bifocals. Watch your step, Bucky. She could be crafty—the stinger might get stung."

"Thanks for your confidence. What's your number there?"

"Never mind. I'll check back, or come down. Luck, baby."

As he shaved and fussed with his hair, he found himself thinking of Edna instead of the prim little widow. Why hadn't he ever married her? Attractive, intelligent, a silky-smooth partner for almost five years, yet when it came down to it he'd ripped her off. Was it the legality of marriage that disturbed him—was it an ethical hurdle too high for his unethical livelihood?

Regardless, he'd better get cracking. It would be out of character to

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keep the widow Breedlove waiting. With a last look in the mirror, he gave his wallet a pat, locked his door, and walked down the flight of steps to the lobby.

In his hurry he almost walked by her. She was sitting stiff and straight near the street door in one of the worn upholstered chairs, looking as out of place as a missionary at a fertility dance. "Mrs. Breedlove!" he said, turning sharply.

"I startled you, didn't I?" she said, getting up. "You know, it's been years since I've been inside this old building. Midge Krause lived here for quite some time, but she's dead and gone. Why do they always put it that way, Mr. Moncrief?"

"What way?"

"Dead—and gone. One presupposes the other, doesn't it? Anyway, I phoned to tell you I might be a little late, but your line was busy, so I just buzzed on down myself. You won't mind driving a foreign car?"

"Not the wagon?"

"Much too cumbersome for evening wear, I think. Here—you drive."

It was a spiffy little Porsche, parked almost two feet from the curb. He helped her in and spun out into the traffic. "Mrs. Breedlove," he said, settling back. "Better yet—Millie. Funny how we ran into each other, wasn't it?"

"I've been thinking on that . . . Willard. I'm not a fatalist or anything dumb like that, but it's almost as if it were planned, premeditated."

He shot her a glance, but she was staring down at her hands. "And one more little thing," she went on. "Dinner is on me. For services rendered, Willard. Carrying in that heavy clock and helping me to set it. Don't argue, because I've made up my mind."

He chuckled. "Just when I was going to say with my charming gallantry that the tab would go on my expense account. Just for tonight, then, I'll be your aging gigolo, Millie."

"And I'll be the last of the red hots," she said, giggling. "Turn left at the next light, Lothario. And damn the libidos—full speed ahead."

They parked beside a modern restaurant and bar carved out of an old mill. In the back, a water wheel still turned. There were heavy beams, nineteenth-century tools and implements hung from the walls, and there was a view of the river from their table. While they waited, sipping wine, he speculated silently on the value of the large exquisitely cut sapphire

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brooch hanging in the V of her blouse. "Beautiful," he said, wetting his lips. "It matches your eyes."

She touched it lightly. "It's terribly flashy, but I feel so dressed up when I wear it."

They talked, or rather she talked. "I do get lonely, Willard," she said. "Ralph's gone, and a lot of my friends have passed on. Loneliness is the companion of old age, yet I'm suspicious of strangers. Around here everyone knows me and they know how I'm fixed. They're all after Ralph's money, Willard. But he left it to me, and no one's going to get their grubby hands on it."

Attacking his salad, Larry considered briefly his own hands, wondering if they were grubby: Mrs. Breedlove, to all appearances, was not and never would be a choice mark. She was a tight-fisted widow clinging to her inherited lodestone like a leech, and trusting no one, especially men. What in the hell had Edna set him up for? Revenge?

Hidden away in Chicago was at least $60,000 in loot the two of them had generated from various little ploys. Could Edna have known he'd left her only the tip of the iceberg and kept the lion's share himself?

She touched his hand. "You're so quiet. Is it something I said?"

"No, no—my mind wanders. Sometimes I can hear my own arteries harden."

"I know. I forget where I put things. Sometimes I have to look up my own phone number. Would you mind if we left? My head's beginning to throb a tiny bit. I'm sorry, Willard."

She rambled on and on during the drive home, mostly about her mother and about Ralph. Larry, alias Willard, stared ahead, nodding here, grunting there. It was time, he decided, to slap a cease-and-desist order on the Breedlove caper, then contact Edna for some kind of explanation.

The house was quiet except for an occasional creak and groan. "Sit down," said Millie. "I'll brew us a cup of tea. It always helps my migraine."

He would have preferred Scotch, but he nodded politely, watching as she went into the library, swung aside a picture, and faced a wall safe. She stared at it, muttered something, then went to a desk and jerked open a drawer. Back at the safe she spun the dial purposefully, swung open the door and, after removing her necklace and brooch, tucked it carefully inside its case, closed the door, and spun the dial.

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"Only be a minute," she said. "Got to feed Tojo too."

"Your butler?" he asked.

"Silly! My cat. He's a full-blooded Siamese and a real snob. I'll be right back, Willard. Please make yourself comfortable."

He had already made up his mind. He was working a dry hole with no chance for any gentlemanly fleecing. He might come out of it with enough for expenses and a little extra. As soon as the kitchen door swung shut, he strode quickly into the library, pulled open the top desk drawer, and leafed through the small memo book until he found the numbers 20R-13L-9R scribbled on the last page. He could hear her in the kitchen talking to the damn cat. If it answered back, he'd know he was in trouble.

The ancient safe opened after a frantic third try. Inside were some loose papers, two fat manila envelopes sealed shut, and the black case. Still watching the kitchen door, he opened it, pocketed the necklace, and was back by the cold fireplace when she returned.

"How's your head?" he asked, accepting the cup from her.

"Pounding a little. I should be in bed is where I should be." Her hand fluttered towards her chest. "My necklace—it's gone, Willard!"

"You put it away," he said smoothly. "Remember?"

"I—I suppose so." She tried to settle down. "It makes me uneasy, wondering. I think I'll make sure."

"No need," he said quickly, patting her hand. "You walked into the library, then went over to the desk for something."

Her eyes lit up. "I remember! I mean—I remember what I forgot. The combination. Why is it, Willard, that I can remember things that happened fifty years ago as clear as day, but ten minutes ago is a blank in my mind?"

"I'm just as bad. I'm forgetting you have a headache and that I've got an early call tomorrow." He held out his hand. "Millie, it's been a pleasure. My pleasure. In the future, beware of Greeks bringing gifts and old gentlemen like myself who could be led into duplicity by your charms."

The grandfather clock struck ten, interrupting her reply. She giggled. "You might say," she said coyly, "it's playing our song. Willard, I do hope we meet again. You've restored my faith in people and how good and honest they really are. Shall I drive you back?"

"No, no, I'll walk. It's only three blocks. Goodbye, Millie, and may the good Lord bless you and keep you."

He heard the lock snap behind him. . .

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He was packing when there was a sharp rap on his door. He glanced around and straightened his tie. In the dim light of the corridor stood a uniformed policeman and a plainclothesman. Behind them was Millie, her eyes blazing.

"That's him!" she shrieked, pointing a finger. "That's Willard!"

The plainclothesman spotted the half-packed suitcase. "All right," he said. "Empty your pockets, sir. On the bed. Everything."

Keys, change, pocket comb, wallet, and then the chunk of sapphire dropped softly to the coverlet.

"Yours?" asked the detective as Millie crowded closer.

She picked it up. "Still warm from my body!" she said. "This—this soft soaper is no better than a sneak thief. I want him arrested!"

The detective shrugged. "Read him his rights, Harry," he said to the officer. "Then cuff him. I'll have to hold the jewelry as evidence, ma'am. You'll get it back. Let's go."

Larry, alias Willard, alias McGeorge, Armand, and Jeremiah, had never been in jail as a guest. It was depressing, and it shook him to the core. He didn't blame Millie, he blamed Edna. She had set him up, then pulled the pin. But why? He still had his stash, and she'd never get a penny of it with him pulling time. He grinned, feeling he had still come out ahead of her game.

An officer rattled his cage after breakfast. "Visitor," he said gruffly. "The Chief said to let you see her."

His spirits rose. It would be Millie, contrite, still under his spell, and ready to drop the charges. Or Edna, come to gloat.

She was there in the interrogation room, sitting prim and straight just as she had in the hotel lobby last night. The officer shut the door behind him. "Millie," he said gently. "I'm sorry."

She sat back, lit a cigarette, and stared at him. "Yeah," she answered softly. "I'll just bet you are—*Bucky.*"

In shock and bewilderment, he stared across the table. The voice was husky, the squeak gone. He felt the same buzz, the same pang. Carefully she removed her wig and glasses, leaned over and popped out her contact lenses. "My God!" he muttered. "Edna!"

"The same. A touch of cosmetic surgery, tinted contact lenses, a bit of character acting. Rented the old house and the cars—all part of my expenses, Larry. You know what, baby? You got yourself in a real jam."

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He swore, banged the table with his fists, and paced to the barred window. A beautiful piece of work, the way she'd set it up. She'd played him like a still hungry but aging trout with a sparkling sapphire spinner. "Damn you," he muttered, turning. "Damn you, Edna! I should have guessed. There was something about you—about her, I mean. That smart line about 'Damn the libidos, full speed ahead.' No little old biddy from Spartenburg would ever come up with that."

"You're so right. Now—where's the stash, Bucky?"

"Chicago. My flat. Spring me and I'll get it. We'll both go."

"Hold it there, kid. Remember the golden rule about the same sucker twice? Exactly *where* in your flat, lover?"

He squirmed. "You don't trust me."

"We have a mutuality of distrust. Where, Larry?"

"Take the back off the right-hand stereo speaker. It's in there."

"Right-hand? The tweeter? You put it in the tweeter? All of it?"

"Every cent I've got in this world."

"Touching. I figure around sixty thousand. You should never have stiffed me, Larry. It would have been better if you'd married me. We were right for each other."

"I came close to asking once or twice," he mumbled.

"Once would have been sufficient." She got up and put on her wig. "Tell you what. You didn't ask—but a girl appreciates the thought. We'll call whatever's in the tweeter our property settlement, love. After I've counted it, I'll come back and drop the charges. So long, Lothario."

With a quick little wave, she was gone. In the corridor, with an officer on his arm, he could still see her as she turned the corner toward the street, once again the prim and dowdy Millie Breedlove.

He shrugged. She was indeed a mark of distinction.

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Taiko's own mother had accused him . . .

INSPECTOR SAITO'S SUMMARY

BY SEIKO LEGRU

Commissioner Ikemiya sat back and allowed his right hand to caress the shadow of a bamboo leaf, silhouetted sharply on the empty center of his desk in one of the largest rooms of the forbidding building that housed Kyoto Police Headquarters. The shadow seemed to feel the touch of his fingers, veered away, and came sliding back again.

"Amazing," Commissioner Ikemiya said. "You're an unusual young fellow, Saito. Now let's go through the case again. I've read your report

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but I always prefer my inspectors to inform me in their own words. Let's start from the beginning—and take your time."

Inspector Saito cleared his throat and studied the small bamboo bush growing from a glass jar on the windowsill. "Yes, sir. Let me see now, it all started when I bought a bowl of soup from Mrs. Taiko's son."

The commissioner nodded helpfully. "Yes? Go on."

Inspector Saito took courage. He was still young, twenty-six, and he hadn't been an inspector for long. The presence of the portly officer reclining in the leather-upholstered chair at the other side of the desk unnerved him, but he plunged ahead bravely.

"A week ago Tuesday, sir, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I was walking through the city and passed the high school south of the silver pagoda. Young Taiko was there with his cart, selling soup which he ladled from a big pot set in his cart. The pot is heated by a hibachi. He's there every working day, and I had eaten his soup before—noodle soup. So I stopped, chatted with the young fellow, ate the soup, returned the bowl, paid, and walked on. I didn't know his name but I liked the fellow—he's easy to talk to. He isn't very bright but he makes a living and he's always cheerful.

"I was just about to cross the next street when a squad car came racing along and stopped next to Taiko's cart, some five hundred feet away from me. I turned and began walking back to see why the constables from the squad car were interfering with him. I didn't want to run, however, and by the time I reached the cart again it was all over. I saw them push Taiko away from the cart, lift the pot of soup and the hibachi, take something out from underneath—something small—and handcuff Taiko. They took him away with them, rather roughly, leaving the cart unattended. As it represents a certain value, I asked some boys from the high school to take it into their compound and make sure nothing happened to it. Then I came back here."

The commissioner offered Saito a cigarette. "Very well. And then? You didn't take action right away?"

"No, sir. It wasn't my business. I am with the homicide branch and surely the constables knew what they were doing. I had guessed by then that they had found drugs in the cart. But somehow I couldn't forget the incident and as my uncle is the principal of that high school I went to visit him. According to my uncle, Taiko-san has been selling his noodle soup opposite the school grounds for at least a year. He is popular with

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the boys and also with the school's staff. There is no drug problem at that particular school. My uncle didn't think Taiko-san had been peddling junk."

"And then you checked with the seventh precinct."

"Yes, sir. I remembered the number on the squad car and traced it to the seventh precinct. One of my classmates from the police academy is an inspector there. I saw him on Thursday. My friend told me that Taiko-san was still under arrest, that a small quantity of heroin wrapped in plastic had been found in his cart, and that Taiko-san insisted he had no idea how the heroin got into his cart."

The commissioner's dark eyes glinted behind his heavy spectacles. "Yes—now we get to the interesting part of your summary. Let's have it."

Saito stubbed out his cigarette. He looked neat and efficient in his dark suit, white shirt, and narrow tie.

"Quite, sir. I asked my colleague how the constables knew the drug was hidden under the hibachi. He told me that the boy's mother, Mrs. Taiko, had come to see the chief inspector of the precinct. She told him her son had been selling drugs to the kids for some time. She said she had warned him many times, pleaded with him to change his ways, and done everything she could, but the insolent punk had just laughed at her. She didn't want to denounce her own son, but she had to consider all the other mothers of the kids at the high school. She couldn't allow innocent youngsters to become corrupted, to become slaves of horrible drugs."

"How did she know her son was a dealer?"

"She said he had been spending a lot of money lately and had even bought a car, an impossibility considering the small profits of his trade. She had become suspicious and had gone through his belongings and found a supply of heroin hidden in his room. Then she had spied on him and discovered the secret compartment under the hibachi in his cart."

"Very well. What did you do then, Saito?"

"I went home and thought, sir. What bothered me was that the heroin was found under the hibachi in the cart. Taiko's hibachi is a clumsy metal container filled with burning charcoal. I couldn't understand that he would have picked such an impractical hiding place. It meant that every time he made a sale, the pot of soup would have to be lifted out of the cart and the hibachi taken out as well. I've read reports on the methods

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of street dealers. They usually revert to all sorts of tricks, like taking the money from their customers first and delivering later. It's usually done in a roundabout way, so that no contact between dealer and customer can be proved. They will hide the junk in a garbage can, for instance, or under a loose brick. They certainly don't lift hot pots and hibachis and then replace them again, all in full view of anybody who happens to be around."

"True."

Saito coughed. "Yes, sir, but thoughts aren't much by themselves. I asked permission to see Taiko-san and my colleague took me to his cell. We questioned the suspect at length. He continued to deny the charge. He isn't a very intelligent young man but he appears to be sincere. He's a pleasant, ordinary sort of fellow, sir."

"Did you tell him his own mother had accused him?"

"No, sir. But I did ask him about his mother and he had nothing to say about her. He was more responsive when I asked him about his father. Taiko Senior sells vegetables in the northern street market. Young Taiko is the couple's only child. He seemed fond of his father and very disappointed that the old man hadn't come to see him."

"Is the father fond of his son?"

"Yes, sir. I went to see Taiko Senior at his market stall and he almost broke into tears when I mentioned his son's name. He said he hadn't gone to the police station because he couldn't bear to see his son a prisoner. He also said he couldn't believe his son would peddle drugs."

"Did the father confirm that his son had been spending a lot of money lately?"

"I asked about that. Apparently young Taiko has bought a car, a second-hand one. I found out where he bought it. The car was purchased on time payments with a ten percent deposit."

"Right. Then what did you do?"

Saito sighed. "Then—well, then the unpleasant part of the investigation started. I never like having to become personal, but—"

The commissioner smiled sadly. "I know. But that's what we have to do. Pour some tea. You must be getting a dry throat."

Saito got up and poured two cups from an antique brass kettle resting on an ornamental hotplate on the side of the commissioner's desk. They raised the cups, bowed slightly at each other, and sipped the hot bitter brew ceremoniously.

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Saito put his cup down. "Thank you, sir. I went to the house of the Taiko family. It is a small wooden house in a row in the northern quarter. Lower middle class, neat, well kept. I found the neighborhood store and pretended I was looking for the Taiko house. I said that I was a real estate salesman, that the Taikos were interested in buying a larger house, and that I wanted to make some inquiries. The young lady in the store was very helpful."

The commissioner grunted. Saito wasn't a particularly handsome man, but he did have a way with the ladies—his boyish charm, no doubt. It was time for the department to find him a suitable wife. He made a mental note to discuss the matter with Saito's immediate superior, grumpy chief-inspector Tamaki, who had several unmarried daughters. "Go on."

"Yes, sir. The young lady in the store told me that old Taiko is fairly well-to-do and that he is a nice man, most regular in his habits. Young Taiko is his only child. But the Mrs. Taiko who made the complaint isn't his mother. She is the young fellow's aunt and his stepmother. His own mother died."

"Aha! And how did she die?"

"An accident, sir. About a year ago the two sisters went boating on Lake Biwa. It was autumn then, just like now, when the leaves show the delicate colors of the season."

"Go on. I am familiar with autumn and the leaves."

"Sorry, sir. The sisters went to see the maples on the lake's shore. There was a sudden gust of wind, the canoe capsized, and the younger sister drowned. The older sister, the present Mrs. Taiko, was found clinging to the overturned canoe."

"Right. That was a year ago. What did the coroner say?"

"Accidental death, sir. Mr. Taiko was very upset, of course, and the older sister took over the household and comforted him. Some four months later he repaid her for her services by marrying her. She is a few years older than he is and not very attractive."

"Could the younger sister swim?"

"No, sir."

"Can the older sister swim?"

"She said she could not but I went into the matter and have been able to prove that she can. There are some statements to that effect attached to my report, sir. Friends and acquaintances say that she can swim, and very well; in fact."

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The commissioner pushed himself free of the desk, scratched his chin, and grinned.

"You can bring in your famous book now, Saito. I'm ready for its venerable instruction. I've heard you are very fond of it."

"It was part of my studies at the academy, sir, and the thesis I wrote on its significance helped me pass my final exams."

"I had to study it too, Saito, but I've never used it. I always considered it to be an interesting antique."

Saito inhaled sharply. "Oh, no, sir. It's very up-to-date."

The commissioner laughed. "Very. *Parallel Cases Under the Pear Tree*, a thirteenth-century manual of jurisprudence and detection. Absolutely the latest thing. Never mind, Saito, I am only joking. The magistrates of China were wise men, especially in the remote past. Let's hear the relevant passage."

Saito opened his briefcase and took out a book wrapped in a piece of brocade. He unfolded the cloth with deft movements.

"Very well, sir. The fourteenth arrest, section B. 'A man and his wife accused their son of unfilial behavior. The judge berated the son in front of his parents; drawing his sword, he ordered the parents to kill the son. The father wept and said he could not kill his son. The mother reviled the lad, took the sword, and attacked him. The judge stopped her and subsequently questioned her relationship to the young man. It turned out that she was the son's stepmother. The judge thereupon put an arrow on his bow and shot her dead. This gladdened the hearts of all who heard about it.' "

The commissioner got up and walked around his desk. He stooped and read through the text. "Yes. That was during the later Chin Dynasty, near the year 1000, if I remember correctly. You have delved deeply, Inspector, but times have changed. I am relieved to note that you haven't shot Mrs. Taiko through the head with your pistol. I don't think such a drastic deed would have gladdened my heart." He went back to his chair. "Well, let's have the end of it."

"Yes, sir. You see, I just couldn't accept that a mother would accuse her own son. And I certainly couldn't believe that a mother would set her son up. If he were found guilty he would be out of the way for many years. Now why would a mother want her son out of the way?"

"Why?"

"Because he was interfering with her peace of mind, sir. Young Taiko

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believed that his aunt had killed his mother. He was suspicious of her, and probably had voiced his suspicions at one time."

"So you assume."

"Yes, sir. There is another relevant case in the same section of the *Pear Tree* book. I won't read it to you but it has to do with a mother who accused her son of a crime so that he would be put to death by the officers of the court. In this case the mother was having illicit relations with a monk. She tried to remove her son to cover up her own crime."

"So?"

"We need proof these days, sir. The Chinese magistrates of a thousand years ago had more freedom."

"A dangerous situation, Saito, that has since been changed."

"Indeed, sir. What I did was somewhat unorthodox. I asked my assistant, Sergeant Kobori, to accompany me, and together we invited Mrs. Taiko to come with us. We didn't tell her where we were going."

"You didn't order her to come with you, I hope?"

"No, sir, we were polite, but she did come. We went to the lake and hired a canoe, the very same canoe she had used when she went boating with her unfortunate sister last year. I researched that little outing and was able to pick the same date. We went out on the water. That was yesterday, sir—rather a misty day. Every now and then we floated through a fog bank. Two of my constables were close by in another boat, pretending to be fishing. When I signaled them they launched a piece of plastic foam, more or less in the shape of a body, wrapped in a grey kimono with a pattern of roses. Mrs. Taiko's sister had been wearing such a kimono on the day of her death. The constables did their job well. They had even attached some water weeds to the object. It came drifting toward us just as we entered another patch of fog."

The commissioner was staring at the inspector.

"Then Mrs. Taiko screamed, sir, and tried to jump out of the canoe. Sergeant Kobori grabbed her just in time or we would have capsized. She was in a bad state, nearly fainting. But she made a full statement later. She had hit her sister with a paddle and then pushed her overboard. She also admitted she had placed the heroin in her stepson's cart. She had bought the drug in the willow quarter out of her savings. We have meanwhile arrested the dealer—he was rather a stubborn suspect, but he did in the end confirm what Mrs. Taiko said. He says he sold her the heroin as medicine, she is not a user."

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"Good," the commissioner said. "But we may not be able to obtain a conviction on the murder charge. The coroner's report did mention a hemorrhage on the first Mrs. Taiko's temple and there are photographs of the wound. But to claim that the paddle inflicted the wound may be tricky. Your suspect's confession gives a wealth of detail, and she also states that she planned the foul deed, but she may go free if some clever lawyer makes her retract the statement."

Saito had risen and was standing at attention, the briefcase containing the slim volume of ancient wisdom clasped under his left arm. "I don't think so, sir. The reconstructed scene on the lake touched her subconscious. She wants to be punished now, to be given the opportunity to wipe out her bad karma."

"Very well, Saito."

The commissioner stared at the door that Saito closed behind him with a discreet and gentle click. He shook his head. "Clever," the commissioner muttered, "*too* clever. We'll have to keep him in hand."

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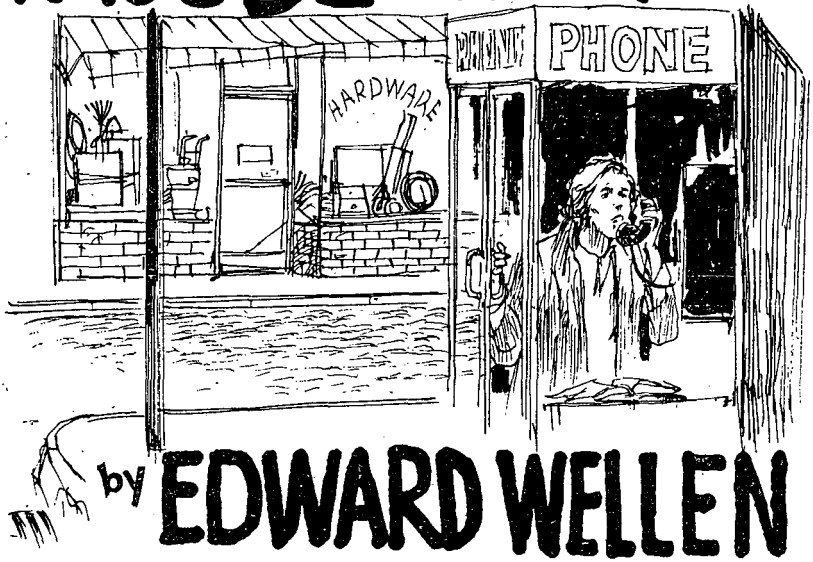
The light could cause a fatal shock . . .

TROUBLE LIGHT



by EDWARD WELLEN

The woman in the street-corner phone booth fumbled through her pocketbook, first for the scrap of newsprint she'd torn out of the morning paper and then for the right change. She heard clicking as the pay phone swallowed the coins, then humming as it waited for her to dial. Her eyes switched back and forth between the news item and the dial as she dialed the toll-free hot line.

A recording told her that calls were flooding the line and asked her to

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hang on, a response would come as soon as possible.

Anxiously she reread the item. It was about a household trouble light that could cause fatal shock. The insulating cover for the socket assembly doubled as a handle for the unit. But the insulating cover was made of exceptionally soft, flexible plastic that, as it turned out, created serious potential for electric shock. When the person using it grasped the handle, he—*he*; always the old male chauvinism, she thought—could touch the metal part of an electrical outlet placed in the handle for plugging in power tools.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission had investigated several fatalities reportedly caused by the product and were recalling it.

A harried but politely authoritative voice came on the line. "U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Miss Hart speaking. Hello? May I help you?"

The woman in the phone booth fought down a surge of nervousness. "I hope so," she said. "It's about the trouble light. That's what they call that light bulb in, like, a wire cage with a hook on top and a long cord, isn't it?"

"That's the product. I'm glad you've seen our alert to consumers. We've ordered a recall of that particular model, but it's impossible to monitor all retail outlets, especially the smaller ones. If you run into a problem taking yours back, tell the dealer to check with this number."

"But that's just it. My husband's on the road and I don't know where he bought it. With the kids in the house, I don't want the thing around. But I don't want to throw it away unless it's the faulty model. My husband would kill me."

"I can give you the model number. Do you have a pencil handy?"

"Yes—just a second—yes, here it is."

"The manufacturer is Lite-Way Electric Corporation and the model is 124C."

The woman in the booth repeated the information aloud as she copied it down.

"Lite-Way Electric Corporation, 124C."

"That's right."

"Thank you so much, Miss Hart."

"You're welcome."

"Goodbye."

The woman hung up. She looked out at the small dusty-windowed

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hardware store across the street and searched through her pocketbook, first for the ten-dollar bill secreted under the lining, then for her compact.

She freshened the powder over the bruise under her right eye, then returned the compact to her bag, reviewed the information Miss Hart had given her, let herself out of the phone booth, and started across the street to the hardware store.

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He got the idea on a hunting trip . . .

A NICE WARM DAY

by BRUCE M. FISHER

"You can go hunting when you've planted the bulbs in the back yard," Emma said, "and you can rake the leaves when you come back."

Royce grinned boyishly. "Are you sure you didn't marry me just to get a gardener?"

"You know I didn't."

Emma's eyes grew dreamy over the breakfast table. She finished her coffee and set the cup down. It rang a clear light tone against the saucer,

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a musical reminder that with money you can afford the best. "Any regrets, dear?"

"None." Three years of practice enabled him to say it with smoothness. "I have a good life with you."

She had married him to gain a pet husband, a respectable lover, nothing more. He had been sitting on a bench, ruggedly handsome in a dark suit, broke except for the pittance he'd got for a stolen camera, when this slim, classy blonde came through the park. She had stopped, looked at him, and smiled faintly—and he, not being stupid, had patted the seat invitingly.

He was tall and dark and pretty good at slinging a line, and they had met frequently after that. He soon discovered that she had money—reason enough to marry a woman ten years his senior.

Not that it had done him much good. He was still a pet husband—sleek, well fed, well dressed, and dependent on her for every dime; a satisfactory lover, and a discontented one. She was thirty-seven now and had grown quite plump, with no abandonment left in her prim little soul.

An only child, dutiful to her strict, churchgoing parents, she had blossomed late and briefly, and that only after they had been killed in a car crash and every cent they had made in real estate had come to her.

All the visions he'd had of trips abroad, sports cars, speedboats, nights on the town, and control of her money, had never materialized. He had thought her an easy mark and then realized, too late, how subtly she had encouraged him in his delusions.

Immediately after the honeymoon, she had brought him home to this house on Sinclair Street. She had taken instantly to the role of the perfect housewife, dressing the part, dusting and cleaning, cooking superb meals, giving him everything but free access to the money he desired.

The tulip bulbs were in the toolshed, which shared the garage with the Buick. Royce loaded the wheelbarrow with them and stood for a moment contemplating the gold ring on his left hand.

She had insisted on a double-ring wedding ceremony, and here he was, banded like a pigeon. A wing-clipped pigeon, held tame and useless by the knowledge that if he once stepped out on Emma, or revealed his true feelings, he would lose the game.

He wheeled the barrow across the back lawn to a corner of the cedar hedge and set it down beside the beds he had prepared with bonemeal

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and compost. He planted the Sweet Harmony bulbs first, according to the chart Emma had drawn up. After a bit, he straightened up to get the kinks out of his back.

The houses of Sinclair Street were modest, set on roomy lawns, tranquil behind the sidewalk maples. Over the back hedge, Bill Simmons was digging carrots in his vegetable garden. Royce checked an impulse to wave. He didn't feel like talking this morning.

Another thorn in Royce's side was the lack of warmth in this neighborhood. John Wilcox, over the west hedge, was coldly polite and formal, given to curt, disdainful nods. Bill Simmons, though friendly enough on the surface, never went beyond the subject of gardening. And Jim Penfield, over the east hedge, was openly contemptuous.

Early last summer, Jim and his skinny twelve-year-old son had come to the hedge for no apparent reason. The kid had spoken first.

"See my new fishing rod?" He held it up for inspection.

"Very nice." Royce felt something coming, but he didn't know what.

"I bought it with money I saved from my allowance." The kid inched closer to his father.

Penfield said proudly, "He works for it. I'm not one to promote laziness in boys. He mows the lawn, rakes leaves, shovels snow in winter. There's no sloth in *him*, no sir!"

"I'm getting a bike next."

Royce had met smug little kids before. "I'm glad to hear it," he said.

Penfield tousled the boy's hair. "He's getting a good second-hand one. I'm backing him against his allowance. It will save me money and teach him something about business."

Royce smiled knowingly at the pair. That kid didn't want a crummy second-hand bike, he wanted a new one. "It sure will," he said.

Then it came—quick, bold and malicious. "What kind of work do you do, Mr. Chanders?" The insinuation was clear.

In other days, Royce would have smashed Penfield on the nose and worse, but these weren't other days; he had to forego the pleasure and not risk the slightest ripple on his placid matrimonial sea. Recalling it now, Royce jabbed the planting trowel deep in the ground with a knife-like thrust. He had been humiliated by ignorant people. Emma would have to pay for that.

And he knew, sure as the frost had tipped the maples with crimson and yellow fire, that he was working his courage up to commit murder.

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An "accident" would do the trick, but it was dangerous. The police, ever suspicious, would grill him like a cheese sandwich. No, Emma's death must appear as a clear case of suicide.

Half the bulbs were planted by noon. He went in, washed up, and sat down to a steaming bowl of tomato soup. Emma beamed at him with fond blue eyes. She should, he thought, have married a man nearer her own age, become a mother perhaps. He was tired of filling her unrealized need for children.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

He reached for the salad. "What man wouldn't?" He let his eyes rove from the curly gold of her hair to the diminishing hollow of her throat and her hefty bosom. "For two pins, I'd take the afternoon off and—"

"You'll finish planting the bulbs," she said with mock severity. "They should have been in earlier. Besides, you're always better after some outdoor exercise."

"If that's true, I should be a holy wonder after a week's hunting."

"You should," she agreed. "But for heaven's sake, Royce, be careful. Don't shoot yourself by accident—or anyone else, for that matter."

"You too," he said. This was a quiet street, and they'd never had any trouble. But you never knew, it could come any time.

She nodded. They'd discussed this before. She knew how to handle the .25-caliber automatic in the desk drawer in the study.

After raisin pie and coffee, Royce returned to the tulips thinking that if a stealthy psychopathic killer strangled Emma during his absence, his grief, though naturally great, would be far outweighed by his thankfulness.

The Bluerock Hunting Lodge was a rambling log structure set on a grassy knoll near a lake of considerable size. There were ducks and teal in the distant marshes, partridge and woodcock in the autumn forest. Royce was expected. His room was ready and it was all paid for. Guns were to be unloaded and broken open before entering and liquor was not allowed until after sunset.

It had been a cold, drizzly day. There was a smell of drying clothes, of tobacco and wood smoke, of good things cooking in the kitchen. The main room had plank flooring, rustic furniture, wildlife prints on the varnished walls, and a roaring fire in the fireplace. Four men in woodsmen's garb were playing cribbage at a corner table, and several others

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were swapping stories, seated on the long benches at the dining table. Royce felt his spirits rise. It was a different world, a man's world here. He began to relax.

Any doubts he had about killing Emma vanished on a mid-week evening.

He had spent the warm October day in the woods after partridge with his sixteen-gauge shotgun. At noontime, he sat on a rock and lunched on sandwiches and a thermos of tea. Squirrels scampered over new-fallen leaves; a pair of Canada jays, bright-eyed and unafraid, came to share his meal. Occasionally, the distant boom of shotguns assured him that his fellow sportsmen were lambasting the mallards and canvasbacks with zeal and number-four shot. He returned to the lodge at dusk with two birds and a voracious appetite—for the best stew he had ever tasted.

He got into a poker game that evening, dealer's choice, two-bit limit, to pass the time. He had just announced, "Draw, jacks or better," when a sharp report outside, much like the boom of a shotgun but with a ringing undertone, stopped him in the act of dealing. "What was that?"

Barrett, a blocky, genial individual, answered, "It's only the gas barrel."

He explained that the forty-five-gallon steel drum which held gas for the outboard motors and such was about half empty. The air space within, having expanded during the warmth of the day, had contracted in the chill night air. The contraction caused a partial vacuum and the booming sound occurred when inward suction overcame the resistance of the bulging steel top. The same sound could be heard tomorrow when the heat of the sun created enough pressure in the barrel to bulge the then-depressed steel out again. It was like a thumb at the bottom of an oil can—but much louder, of course.

Royce thanked him and dealt the cards, but his mind was no longer on the game. A vague idea, floating about his subconscious, gradually emerged and indicated the way to get rid of Emma.

It involved his lawn roller, which was also a drum, though smaller and of thicker steel.

He returned home on Saturday with a brace of partridge, went to church with Emma on Sunday, and dutifully raked the leaves on Monday. On Tuesday he emptied the lawn roller of its water ballast and took it to a welding shop, where they soon replaced the clamp-type stopper with a smaller screw-type bung from an oil drum. On the way home he bought

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a short length of galvanized iron pipe, threaded to fit the new opening. He had all winter to puzzle out the rest of it.

In late April when the returning sun shone warm, he put the lawn roller into the trunk of the car and drove thirty miles to a secluded spot in the woods.

He upended the roller, removed the steel plug, and poured in five gallons of high-test gasoline. Water wouldn't do. Gas was volatile; it created surer pressure under the sun simply because its atoms were more excitable. He caulked the threads of the galvanized pipe, screwed it into the roller, and tightened it down with a pair of vise-grip pliers.

He took a shotgun shell from his pocket, carefully removed the shot, and dumped out most of the powder. He cut the plastic casing down, leaving just enough to close over the remaining powder in the brass base. He placed it in the pipe and wired it down with a thin, flexible wire whose ends ran through two tiny holes in the upper sides. Then he sat back with his watch and pocket thermometer and waited.

This galvanized pipe, cut to less than four inches in length, contained a cunning arrangement of cork, spring, wooden guide, nail firing pin, and spacers. The wooden guide, held immovable by a screw, kept the works from being extruded by pressure; a thin steel ring, spot-welded near the bottom, prevented suction from hauling any part of the apparatus into the drum.

In theory, pressure in the drum would force the greased, tight-fitting cork against the double-acting spring; the spring, much like the spring arrangement in a light switch, would be easily pushed past the point of resistance and snap forward, driving the guided firing pin into the base of the shell.

He waited, trembling a little, sweating with anxiety. It took sixty-two minutes at a temperature of seventy-four degrees, then—*Bang!* It sounded exactly like a .25-caliber pistol being fired.

Royce jumped up, giddy with excitement. He glanced around furtively, then flung out his arms exultantly.

But he had to be sure it would work repeatedly, had to be sure of the timing, so he sealed the roller with the steel plug, hid it in the brush, and drove home. Three more after-breakfast trials convinced him. The mechanism was easily recocked without pressure against it by pushing the firing pin back with a piece of coat-hanger wire. He had between

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fifty-seven and eighty-two minutes in which to act, depending on the temperature.

He took the lawn roller home and upended it on the south side of the garage between the forsythia bushes. He placed a cut-down shotgun shell and the pipe on the shelf in the toolshed; in readiness. All he needed now was a nice warm day.

It had to be a Saturday, when the Penfields were away grocery shopping, when Bill Simmons was inevitably working in his back yard, and, above all, when the sun was shining bright and warm.

Perfect conditions didn't arrive until the third Saturday in May. It was a dead-calm morning after a cool night. Royce saw Penfield's car turn onto the street. Through the kitchen window he saw Bill Simmons emerge from his back door with a basket of plants and a trowel. When the sun finally shone past Penfield's house, he went to the lawn roller, removed the plug, and inserted the triggered pipe. He tightened it down and wired the doctored shotgun shell in place. What, he thought, could be more innocent? Nobody would give it a second glance.

Emma was finishing a belated breakfast. "You seem restless this morning, dear," she said, pouring herself another cup of coffee. "Is anything wrong?"

"Not really." His face felt stiff despite the easy words. "I have a little surprise for you, that's all." He glanced through the kitchen window in time to see Bill Simmons stoop by his vegetable plot. "I'll get it for you."

He went to the bedroom, took a pillow from its slip, got a paper towel from the bathroom and the pistol from the study, then came up behind her, put the thick pillow over the gun to muffle the report and the paper towel over his hand to prevent microscopic powder stains in firing. "Don't look now," he cautioned. "Try to guess what it is by the feel." He placed the pillow against her head.

"Oh, Royce," she breathed.

With monumental satisfaction, he squeezed the trigger.

She crumpled, toppled from her chair, and lay limp on the floor.

Royce wiped the gun clean, pressed her right-hand fingerprints all over it, and placed it to the right of her body. He returned the pillow into its slip on the bed—then cleared the table and put the dishes in the sink, leaving only her empty cup and saucer on the table. That lonely cup would, he felt, wadding the paper towel into a ball and tossing it in

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the garbage, indicate some desolation on her part before she took the final suicidal step.

He went out, got a rake from the toolshed, marched across the back lawn, and began raking the cuttings he had purposely neglected after trimming the hedge earlier. After a few minutes, he made his pitch.

"Morning, Bill. Planting tomatoes?"

"You bet." Simmons set the last plant, watered it, and came to the hedge, drawing out his pipe and tobacco pouch. "It's going to be a scorcher today."

"I guess it is." Royce wet his lips. "Uh, Bill—"

"Yes?"

"Well, you're married, and I was wondering—"

Simmons held a match to his pipe and squinted at Royce through the flame. He puffed vigorously, saying nothing.

"Damn it," Royce broke out impulsively, "it's Emma. She's worse than usual this morning."

"Worse? I didn't know she was ailing."

"I'd have preferred to keep it quiet," Royce confided. "I've seen her fits of depression before, but never anything like this. I don't know what to do about it."

"Depression? *Emma?*"

"Oh, yes. Very few people know about it. They always see her as a cheerful person with a happy smile. They never see her despair. I've urged her to see a psychiatrist, but she refuses, I don't know why. Nearly everybody sees a psychiatrist these days."

"A lot of people fall for that racket," Simmons agreed.

"And she drinks too much—you'd never think it to look at her. But now, this morning—"

Royce checked himself. The waiting, the anticipation, was getting to him. He was talking too fast, too glibly. He had to pace himself, release things slowly.

"What about this morning?"

Royce shook his head. Would that damned explosion never come? Good God—had he forgotten to cock the spring? His heart was pounding, giving his speech a nervous quality. "This morning—" he bit his lip "—this morning she threatened to kill herself!"

"People who threaten it never do."

"I hope you're right, Bill. If she slashed her wrists, I couldn't take it.

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She was so normal when we woke up. Then something went wrong, some little thing I said maybe, that took her the wrong way. She started railing at me, said I didn't love her any more—things like that."

Simmons grinned. "That's a woman's favorite line. They use it when they need a little reassurance, a little comforting."

"I don't know, Bill. She's really bad this—"

Bang!

It was louder than he had expected. "My God!" He started toward the house, then turned. "Come with me, Bill—please."

Simmons didn't budge. "It sounded like a backfire to me."

He spun toward the house, spun back. "Please, Bill, come with me! I can't go in alone."

Simmons leaped the hedge and ran with Royce to the house. They burst in and there was Emma, dead on the floor, with the .25-caliber automatic beside her.

While Royce whimpered over the body, Simmons phoned the police. He helped Royce to his feet, found the brandy, and poured them both stiff drinks.

Two uniformed policemen arrived a few minutes later, ascertained Emma was dead, took notes, and stood guard until a Lieutenant Hayden arrived.

Hayden was a compact man, well muscled and neat in a grey suit. He didn't seem overly bright. After introducing himself and getting their names, he stood and surveyed the scene for several minutes. Then he moved to the table and looked at the body without kneeling down or touching it.

"Who found her?" he asked.

"We both did," Simmons answered. "When we heard the shot, we came running."

"From where?"

"From the hedge at the back where we were talking."

"Together, eh? Then you cancel each other out. Did you see any prowlers around?"

"It couldn't have been a prowler," Royce said. "I wasn't out of the house five minutes when it happened."

Simmons said gently, "More like fifteen. I remember thinking I'd better start to shade the tomatoes from the sun."

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"How about your neighbors?" asked Hayden.

Royce sighed dismally. "Jim Penfield's a nice enough guy and so's John Wilcox on the other side. I don't know the people across the street." What was this man getting at?

Simmons shook his head regretfully. "I'm afraid it's suicide, Officer. I was facing Royce over the hedge. I'd have seen anyone approach or leave the house."

Hayden tapped the tabletop as if making a point. "Men blow their brains out. Women generally take sleeping pills, turn on the gas, or cut their wrists. They'd rather glide into oblivion than ruin their looks this way. And very few do it this early in the day. Is that gun yours, Mr. Chanders?"

"No, it's Emma's. It's registered, and she had a permit for it."

The policeman's small, flat eyes of no discernible hue searched Royce's youthful face.

"Was Mrs. Chanders a wealthy woman?"

"I really don't know," Royce confessed. "She was, in many ways, very secretive. And—"

Crack!

There was no mistaking the sound. Hayden whirled to the door, his gun drawn.

"You two stay here!"

He dashed outside and sped around the house in search of Emma's killer. He looked in the garage and backed out, sniffing the warm, still air.

"What are you shooting at, mister?"

A boy was standing beside the house next door.

Hayden beckoned, went forward, and stood by the forsythia bushes. "Did you hear a shot just now?"

"I heard you shoot that gun."

"You did? Did you hear a shot earlier, about thirty minutes ago?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Sure. I've been here all morning. I didn't hear any shot before."

"That's strange. There are two men in this house who heard a shot about half an hour ago. They'd swear to it."

"They'd be lying, then," said the boy.

Hayden thought.

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"Did you hear anything earlier that might have *sounded* like a shot? A backfire, maybe?"

Surprisingly, the kid flushed and dug his toes into the turf.

Hayden spoke sharply. "I'm a policeman. You'd better tell me the truth."

"You're a cop!" The kid flinched, his thin face pale.

Hayden flashed his badge.

"Now then, let's have it."

"Well, there was my bicycle tube."

"What about it?"

"It's always going flat. I want a new one, but my father won't buy me one. I have to keep on patching the old one. I got sick of patching it so when my parents went shopping this morning I took the tube out and pumped it up. Only it wouldn't pump up right. It just went into a great big bulge. And I pumped it bigger and bigger. Then I stuck my knife into it."

He laughed nervously.

"It went off like a cannon. I put it back on my bike, so when Mommy and Daddy get home I can pretend—"

"Hold it," Hayden said. "I get the picture." He hid a smile. "I'll let you go this time, son. But from now on you'd better play straight with your parents and everybody else."

The boy streaked away. Hayden sniffed again. The faint odor of gunsmoke was gone now, but he knew he hadn't imagined it. He had heard a shot fired, and so had three others.

He pivoted slowly, wonderingly, with a spooky sensation at his back and a growing conviction that the answer to the riddle was close to hand.

He looked over the lawn roller, two feet away. He looked beneath the forsythia bushes, first the one whose shadow had retarded the heat of the sun, then the other.

He looked behind the lawn roller, leaned over it to look along the foundation of the garage, and found himself looking at a thin brassy gleam ten inches in front of his nose.

He backed off to get it in focus and saw a short piece of pipe where none should be if a man wanted to roll that roller. He pushed the thin wire aside, picked the blasted shotgun shell out of the pipe, and examined the indentation made by the firing pin. He peered into the pipe and saw a bright dot of steel in the center.

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"Cute," he murmured. "Very cute."

Thoughtfully, he returned to the house.

Royce was slumped in a chair, his head in his hands.

Hayden explained. "That first 'shot' you heard, the one that brought you running in here, was only the kid next door blowing a bicycle tube to pieces so his father'd have to buy him a new one. Mrs. Chanders was dead before that. Murdered. The second shot was—"

Royce knew what the second shot was. Hayden's explanation of the first one set a manic fury boiling in his veins.

"I always knew that kid was a damned rotten little sneak!" he said between clenched teeth.

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Hornback had vanished like a puff of smoke . . .

THIN AIR

by BILL PRONZINI

The man I'd been hired to follow was named Lewis Hornback. He was 43, had dark-brown hair and average features, drove a four-door Dodge Monaco, and lived in a fancy apartment building on Russian Hill. He was also cheating on his wife with an unknown woman and had misappropriated a large sum of money from the interior-design firm they co-owned. Or so Mrs. Hornback alleged. My job, if I could manage it, was to dig up evidence to support those allegations.

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Mrs. Hornback had not told me what she intended to do with any such evidence. Have poor Lewis drawn and quartered, maybe—or at least locked away for the rest of his natural life. She was that kind of woman—a thin, pinch-faced harridan ten years older than her husband with vindictive eyes and a desiccated look about her, as if all her vital juices had dried up a long time ago. If Hornback really was cheating on her, maybe he had justifiable cause. But that was not for me to say. It wasn't my job to make moral judgments—all I had to do was make an honest living for myself.

So I took Mrs. Hornback's retainer check, promised to make daily reports, and went to work that same afternoon. Hornback, it seemed, was in the habit of leaving their office at five o'clock most weekdays and not showing up at the Russian Hill apartment until well past midnight. At 4:30 I found a parking space near the garage where he kept his car, on Clay near Van Ness. It was a cold and windy November day, but the sky was clear, with no sign of fog above Twin Peaks or out near the Golden Gate. Which was a relief—tail jobs are tricky enough, especially at night, without the added difficulty of bad weather.

Hornback showed up promptly at five. Eight minutes later he drove his Dodge Monaco down the ramp and turned left on Clay. I gave him a block lead before I pulled out behind him.

He went straight to North Beach, to a little Italian restaurant not far from Washington Square. Meeting the girl friend for dinner, I figured, but it turned out I was wrong. After two drinks at the bar, while I nursed a beer, he took a table alone. I sat at an angle across the room from him, treated myself to *pollo al' diavolo*, and watched him pack away a three-course meal and half a liter of the house wine. Nobody came to talk to him except the waiter; he was just a man having a quiet dinner alone.

He polished off a brandy and three cigarettes for dessert, lingering the way you do after a heavy meal. When he finally left the restaurant it was almost 7:30. From there he walked over to Upper Grant, where he gawked at the young counterculture types who frequent the area, did a little window-shopping, and stopped at a newsstand and a drugstore. I stayed on the opposite side of the street, fifty yards or so behind him. That's about as close to a subject as you want to get on foot. But the walking tail got me nothing except exercise. Hornback was still alone when he led me back to where he had left his car.

His next stop was a small branch library at the foot of Russian Hill,

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where he dropped off a couple of books. Then he headed south on Van Ness, north on Market out of the downtown area, and up the winding expanse of Upper Market to the top of Twin Peaks. There was a little shopping area up there, a short distance beyond where Market blends into Portola Drive. He pulled into the parking area in front and went into a neighborhood tavern called Dewey's Place.

I parked down near the end of the lot. Maybe he was meeting the girl friend here or maybe he had just gone into the tavern for a drink; he seemed to like his liquor pretty well. I put on the grey cloth cap I keep in the car, shrugged out of my coat and turned it inside out—it's one of those reversible models—and put it on again that way, just in case Hornback had happened to notice me at the restaurant earlier. Then I stepped out into the cold wind blowing up from the ocean and crossed to Dewey's Place.

There were maybe a dozen customers inside, most of them at the bar. Hornback was down at the far end with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, but the stools on both sides of him were empty. None of the three women in the place looked to be unescorted.

So maybe there wasn't a girl friend. Mrs. Hornback could have been wrong about that, even if she was right about the misappropriation of business funds. It was 9:45 now. If the man had a lady on the side, they would have been together by this time of night. And so far, Hornback had done nothing unusual or incriminating. Hell, he hadn't even done anything interesting.

I sat at the near end of the bar and sipped at a draft beer, watching Hornback in the mirror. He finished his drink, lit a fresh cigarette, and gestured to the bartender for a refill. I thought he looked a little tense, but in the dim lighting I couldn't be sure. He wasn't waiting for anybody, though, I could tell that: no glances at his watch or at the door. Just aimlessly killing time? It could be. For all I knew, this was how he spent each of his evenings out—eating alone, driving alone, drinking alone. And his reason might be the simplest and most innocent of all—he left the office at five and stayed out past midnight because he didn't want to go home to Mrs. Hornback.

When he had downed his second drink he stood up and reached for his wallet. I had already laid a dollar bill on the bar, so I slid off my stool and left ahead of him. I was already in my car when he came out.

Now where? I thought as he fired up the Dodge. Another bar some-

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where? A late movie? Home early?

None of those. He surprised me by swinging back east on Portola and then getting into the left-turn lane for Twin Peaks Boulevard. The area up there is residential, at least on the lower part of the hillside. The road itself winds upward at steep angles, makes a figure-eight loop through the empty wooded expanse of Twin Peaks Park, and curls down on the opposite side of the hill.

Hornback stayed on Twin Peaks Boulevard, climbing toward the park. So he was probably not going to visit anybody in the area; he had bypassed the only intersecting streets on this side, and there were easier ways to get to the residential sections below the park to the north. I wondered if he was just marking more time, if it was his habit to take a long solitary drive around the city before he headed home.

There was almost no traffic and I dropped back several hundred feet to keep my headlights out of his rear-vision mirror on the turns. The view from up there was spectacular; on a night like this you could see for miles in a 360-degree curve—the ocean, the full sweep of the Bay, both bridges, the intricate pattern of lights that was San Francisco and its surrounding communities. Inside the park we passed a couple of cars pulled off on the lookouts that dotted the area: people, maybe lovers, taking in the view.

Hornback went through half the figure-eight from east to west, driving without hurry. Once I saw the brief, faint flare of a match as he lit another cigarette. When he came out on the far side of the park he surprised me again. Instead of continuing down the hill he slowed and turned to the right onto a short, hooked spur road leading to another of the lookouts.

I tapped my brakes as I neared the turn, trying to decide what to do. The spur was a dead end. I could follow him around it or pull off the road and wait for him to come out again. The latter seemed to be the best choice and I cut my headlights and started to glide off onto a turnaround. But then, over on the spur, Hornback swung past a row of cypress trees that lined the near edge of the lookout. The Dodge's brake lights flashed through the trees, then his headlights, too, winked out.

I kept on going, made the turn, and drifted onto a second, tree-shadowed turnaround just beyond the intersection. Diagonally in front of me I could see Hornback ease the Dodge across the flat surface of the lookout and bring it to a stop nose-up against a perimeter guard rail. The distance between us was maybe 75 yards.

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What's he up to now? I thought. Well, he had probably stopped there to take in the view and maybe do a little brooding. The other possibility was that he was waiting for someone. A late-evening rendezvous with the alleged girl friend? The police patrol Twin Peaks Park at regular intervals because kids have been known to use it as a lover's lane, but it was hardly the kind of place two adults would pick for an assignation. Why meet up here when the city is full of hotels and motels?

The Dodge gleamed a dullish black in the starlight. From where I was I could see all of the passenger side and the rear third of the driver's side; the interior was shrouded in darkness. Pretty soon another match flared, smearing the gloom for an instant with dim yellowish light. Hornback was not quite a chain smoker, but he was the next thing to it—at least a two-pack-a-day man. I felt a little sorry for him, and a little envious at the same time; I had smoked two packs a day myself until a year and a half ago, when a doctor discovered a benign lesion on one of my lungs. I hadn't had a cigarette since, though there were still times I craved one. Like right now, sitting watching that dark car and waiting for something to happen or not happen.

I slouched down behind the wheel and tried to make myself comfortable. Five minutes passed, ten minutes, fifteen. Behind me, half a dozen sets of headlights came up or went down the hill on Twin Peaks Boulevard, but none of them turned in where we were. And nothing moved that I could see in or around the Dodge.

I occupied my mind by speculating again about Hornback. He was a puzzle, all right. Maybe a cheating husband and a thief, or maybe an innocent on both counts—the victim of a loveless marriage and a shrewish wife. He hadn't done anything of a guilty or furtive nature tonight, and yet here he was, parked alone at 10:40 P.M. on a lookout in Twin Peaks Park. It could go either way. So which way was it going to go?

Twenty minutes.

And I began to feel just a little uneasy. You get intimations like that when you've been a cop of one type or another as long as I have—vague flickers of wrongness that seem at first to have no foundation. The feeling made me fidgety. I sat up and rolled down my window and peered across at the Dodge. Darkness. Stillness. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Twenty-five minutes.

The wind was chill against my face and I rolled the window back up, but the coldness had got into the car. I drew my coat tight around my

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neck and kept staring at the Dodge and the bright mosaic of lights beyond, like luminous spangles on the black-velvet sky.

Thirty minutes.

The uneasiness grew and became acute. Something was wrong over there, damn it. A half hour was a long time for a man to sit alone on a lookout, whether he was brooding or not. It was even a long time to wait for a rendezvous. But that was only part of the sense of wrongness. There was something else.

Hornback had not lit another cigarette since that one nearly half an hour ago.

The realization made me sit up again. He had been smoking steadily all night long, even during his walk along Upper Grant after dinner. When I was a heavy smoker I couldn't have gone half an hour without lighting up; it seemed funny that Hornback could or would, considering that there was nothing else for him to do in there. He might have run out, of course, yet I remembered seeing a full pack in front of him on the bar at Dewey's Place.

What could be wrong? He was alone up here in his car except for my watching eyes; nothing could have happened to him. Unless . . .

Suicide?

The word popped into my mind and made me feel even colder. Suppose Hornback was innocent of infidelity, but suppose he was also despondent over the state of his marriage. Suppose all the aimless wandering tonight had been a prelude to an attempt on his own life—a man trying to work up enough courage to kill himself on a lonely road high above the city. It was possible; I didn't know enough about Hornback to judge his mental stability.

I wrapped both my hands around the wheel, debating with myself. If I went over to his car and checked on him and he was all right, I would have blown not only the tail but my client's trust. But if I stayed here and Hornback had taken pills or done God knew what to himself, I might be sitting passively by while a man died.

Headlights appeared on Twin Peaks Boulevard behind me, then swung in a slow arc onto the spur road. I drifted lower in the seat and waited for them to pass.

Only they did not pass. The car drew abreast of mine and came to a halt. Police patrol. I sensed it even before I saw the darkened dome flasher on the roof. The passenger window was down and the cop on that

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side extended a flashlight through the opening and flicked it on. The light pinned me for three or four seconds, bright enough to make me squint, then shut off. The patrolman motioned for me to roll down my window.

I glanced past the cruiser to Hornback's Dodge. It remained dark and there was still no movement anywhere in the vicinity. Well, the decision whether or not to check on him was out of my hands now; the cops would want to have a look at the Dodge in any case. And in any case, my assignment was blown.

I let out a breath and wound down the glass. The patrolman, a young guy with a moustache, said, "What's going on here, fella?"

So I told him, keeping it brief, and let him have a look at the photostat of my investigator's license. He seemed half skeptical and half uncertain; he had me get out and stand to one side while he talked things over with his partner, a heavy-set older man with a beer belly larger than mine. After which the partner took out a second flashlight and trotted across the lookout to the Dodge.

The younger cop asked me some questions and I answered them, but my attention was on the older guy. I watched him reach the driver's door and shine his light through the window. A moment later he appeared to reach down for the door handle, but it must have been locked because I didn't see the door open or him lean inside. Instead he put his light up to the window again, slid it over to the window on the rear door, and then turned abruptly to make an urgent semaphoring gesture.

"Sam!" he shouted. "Get over here on the double!"

The young patrolman, Sam, had his right hand on the butt of his service revolver as we ran ahead to the Dodge. I was expecting the worst by this time, but I wasn't at all prepared for what I saw inside that car. I just stood there gaping while the cops' lights crawled through the interior.

There were spots of drying blood across the front seat.

But the seat was empty, and so was the back seat, and so were the floorboards.

Hornback had disappeared.

One of the two inspectors who arrived on the scene a half hour later was Ben Klein, an old-timer and a casual acquaintance from my own years on the San Francisco cops in the '40s and '50s. I had asked the

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patrolmen to call in Lieutenant Eberhardt, probably my closest friend on or off the force, because I wanted an ally in case matters became dicey. Eb, though, was evidently still on the day shift. I hadn't asked for Klein, but I felt a little better when he showed up.

When he had finished checking over the Dodge we went off to one side of it, near the guard rail. From there I could look down a steep slope dotted with stunted trees and underbrush. Search teams were moving along it with flashlights, looking for some sign of Hornback, but so far they didn't seem to be having any luck. Up here the area was swarming with men and vehicles, most but not all of them official. The usual rubberneckers and media types were in evidence along the spur and back on Twin Peaks Boulevard.

"Let me get this straight," Klein said when I had finished giving him my story. He had his hands jammed into his coat pockets and his body hunched against the wind, because the night had turned bitter cold now. "You followed Hornback here around ten-fifteen and you were in a position to watch his car from the time he parked it to the time the two patrolmen showed up."

"That's right."

"You were over on that turnaround?"

"Yes. The whole time."

"And you didn't see anything inside or outside the Dodge?"

"Nothing at all. I couldn't see inside it—too many shadows—but I could see most of the area around it."

"Did you take your eyes off it for any length of time?"

"No. A few seconds now and then, sure, but no more than that."

"Could you see all four doors?"

"Three of the four," I said. "Not the driver's door."

"That's how he disappeared, then."

I nodded. "But what about the dome light? Why didn't I see it go on?"

"It's not working. The bulb's defective. That was one of the first things I checked after we wired up the door lock."

"I also didn't see the door open. I might have missed that, I'll admit, but it's the kind of movement that would have attracted my attention." I paused, working my memory. "Hornback couldn't have gone away toward the road or down the embankment to the east or back into those trees over there. I would have seen him for sure if he had. The only other direction is down this slope, right in front of his car; but if that's

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it, why didn't I notice any movement when he climbed over the guard rail?"

"Maybe he didn't climb over it. Maybe he crawled under it."

"Why would he have done that?"

"I don't know. I'm only making suggestions."

"Well, I can think of one possibility, I suppose."

"Which is?"

"The suicide angle," I said. "I told you I was worried about that. What if Hornback decided to do the Dutch, and while he was sitting in the car he used a pocketknife or something else sharp to slash his wrists? That would explain the blood on the front seat. Only he lost his nerve at the last second, panicked, opened the door, fell out of the car, and crawled under the guard rail."

I stopped. The idea was no good. I had realized that even as I laid it out.

Klein knew it too. He was shaking his head. "No blood outside the driver's door or along the side of the car or anywhere under the guard rail. A man with slashed wrists bleeds pretty heavily. Besides, if he'd cut his wrists and had second thoughts, why leave the car at all? Why not just start it up and drive to the nearest hospital?"

"Yeah," I said.

"There's another screwy angle—the locked doors. Who locked them? Hornback? His attacker, if there was one? Why lock them at all?"

I had no answer. I stood brooding out at the city lights.

"Assume he was attacked," Klein said. "By a mugger, say, who's decided to work up here because of the isolation. The attacker would have had to get to the car with you watching, which means coming up this slope, along the side of the car, and in through the driver's door—*if* it wasn't locked at that time. But I don't buy it. It's TV-commando stuff, too far-fetched."

"There's another explanation," I said musingly.

"What's that?"

"The attacker was in the car all along."

"Not a mugger, you mean?"

"Right. Somebody who had it in for Hornback."

Klein frowned; he had heavy jowls and it made him look like a bulldog. "I thought you said Hornback was alone the whole night. Didn't meet anybody."

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"He didn't. But suppose he was in the habit of frequenting Dewey's Place and this somebody knew it. He or she could have been waiting in the parking lot, slipped inside the Dodge while Hornback and I were in the tavern, hidden on the floor in back, and stayed hidden until Hornback came up here and parked. Then maybe stuck a knife in him."

"Sounds a little melodramatic, but I guess it's possible. Still, what kind of motive fits that explanation?"

"One connected with the money his wife claims Hornback stole from their firm."

"You're not thinking the wife could've attacked him?"

"No. If she was going to do him in, it doesn't make sense she'd hire me to tail him around. Hornback might have had some accomplice in the theft. Maybe they had a falling-out and the accomplice wanted to keep all the money for himself."

"Maybe," Klein said, but he sounded dubious. "The main trouble with that theory is, what happened to Hornback's body? The attacker would have had to get both himself *and* Hornback out of the car, then drag the body down the slope. Now why in hell would somebody kill a man way up here, with nobody around as far as he knew, and take the corpse away with him instead of just leaving it in the car?"

"I don't know. But I can't figure it any other way."

"Neither can I right now. Let's see what the search teams and the forensic boys turn up."

What the searchers and the lab people turned up, however, was nothing—no sign of Hornback dead or alive, no sign of anybody else in the area, no bloodstains except for those inside the car, no other evidence of any kind. Hornback—or his body—and maybe an attacker as well had not only vanished from the Dodge while I was watching it; he had vanished completely and without a trace. As if into thin air.

It was 1:30 A.M. before Klein let me go home. He asked me to stop in later at the Hall of Justice to sign a statement, but aside from that he seemed satisfied that I had given him all the facts as I knew them. But I was not quite off the hook yet, nor would I be until Hornback turned up. *If* he turned up. My word was all the police had for what had happened on the lookout, and I was the first to admit that it was a pretty bizarre story.

When I got to my Pacific Heights flat I thought about calling Mrs.

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Hornback. But it was after two o'clock by then and I saw no point or advantage in phoning a report at this time of night; the police would already have told her about her husband's disappearance. So I drank a glass of milk and crawled into bed and tried to sort things into some kind of order.

How had Hornback vanished? Why? Was he dead or alive? An innocent man, or as guilty as his wife claimed? The victim of suicidal depression, the victim of circumstance, or the victim of premeditated murder?

No good. I was too tired to come up with fresh answers to any of those questions.

After a while I slept and dreamed a lot of nonsense about people dematerializing inside locked cars, vanishing in little puffs of smoke. A long time later the telephone woke me up. I keep the damned thing in the bedroom and it went off six inches from my ear and sat me up in bed, disoriented and grumbling. I pawed at my eyes and got them unstuck. There was grey morning light in the room; the nightstand clock said 6:55. Four hours' sleep and welcome to a new day.

The caller, not surprisingly, was Mrs. Hornback. She berated me for not getting in touch with her, then she demanded my version of last night. I gave it to her.

"I don't believe a word of it," she said.

"That's your privilege, ma'am. But it happens to be the truth."

"We'll see about that." Her voice sounded no different from the way it had when she'd hired me: cold, clipped, and coated with vitriol. There was not a whisper of compassion. "How could you let something like that happen? What kind of detective are you?"

A poor tired one, I thought. But I said, "I did what you asked me to, Mrs. Hornback. What happened on the lookout was beyond my control."

"Yes? Well, if my husband isn't found, and if I don't recover the money I *know* he stole, you'll hear from my lawyer. You can count on that." There was a clattering sound and then the line began to buzz.

Nice lady. A real princess.

I lay back down. I was still half asleep and pretty soon I drifted off again. This time I dreamed I was in a room where half a dozen guys were playing poker. They were all private eyes from the pulp magazines I read and collected—Race Williams, Jim Bennett, Max Latin, some of the best of the bunch. Latin wanted to know what kind of detective I was; his voice sounded just like Mrs. Hornback's. I said I was a pulp detective.

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They kept saying, "No you're not, you can't play with us because you're not one of us," and I kept saying, "But I am, I'm the same kind of private eye you are."

The jangling of the phone ended that nonsense and sat me up the way it had before. I focused on the clock: 8:40. Conspiracy against my sleep, I thought, and fumbled up the handset.

"Wake you up, hotshot?" a familiar voice said. Eberhardt.

"What do you think?"

"Sorry about that. I've got news for you."

"What news?"

"That funny business up on Twin Peaks last night—your boy Hornback's been found."

I stopped feeling sleepy and the fuzziness cleared out of my mind. "Where?" I said. "Is he all right?"

"In Golden Gate Park," said Eberhardt. "And no, he's not all right. He's dead—been dead since last night. Stabbed in the chest, probably with a butcher knife."

I got down to the Hall of Justice at ten o'clock, showered, shaved, and full of coffee. Eberhardt was in his office in General Works, gnawing on one of his briar pipes and looking as sour as usual. The sourness was just a façade; he wasn't half as grim and grouchy as he liked people to think.

"I've been rereading Klein's report," he said as I sat down. "You get mixed up in the damnedest cases these days."

"Don't I know it. What have you got on Hornback?"

"Nothing much. Guy out jogging found the body at seven-fifteen in a clump of bushes along JFK Drive. Stabbed in the chest, like I told you on the phone—a single wound that penetrated the heart, the probable weapon a butcher knife. The medical examiner says death was instantaneous. I guess that takes care of the suicide theory."

"I guess it does."

"No other marks on the body," he said, "except for a few small scratches on the hands and on one cheek."

"What kind of scratches?"

"Just scratches. The kind you get crawling around in woods or underbrush, or the kind a body might get if it was dragged through the same type of terrain. The ME will have more on that when he finishes his post-mortem."

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"What was the condition of Hornback's clothes?"

"Dirty, torn in a couple of places. The same thing applies."

"Anything among his effects?"

"No. The usual stuff—wallet, handkerchief, change, a pack of cigarettes, and a box of matches. Eighty-three dollars in the wallet and a bunch of credit cards. That seems to rule out the robbery motive."

"I don't suppose there was any evidence where he was found."

"None. Killed somewhere else, the way it figures. Like up on that Twin Peaks lookout. Hornback's blood type was AO; it matches the type found on the front seat of his car."

We were silent for a time. I watched Eberhardt break his briar in half and run a pipe-cleaner through the stem. Then I said, "Damn it, Eb, it doesn't make sense. What's the motive behind the whole business? Why would the killer take Hornback's body away and then dump it in Golden Gate Park later? How could he have got it and himself out of the car without me noticing that something was going on?"

"You tell me, mastermind. You were there. You ought to know what you saw or didn't see."

I opened my mouth, closed it again, and blinked at him. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. I said you were there and you ought to know what you saw or didn't see."

What I saw. And what I didn't see.

Eberhardt put his pipe back together and tamped tobacco into the bowl. "We'd better come up with some answers pretty soon," he said. "Klein got back a little while ago from breaking the news to the widow. He says she blames you for letting Hornback get killed."

Two things I didn't see that I *should* have seen.

"She claims he siphoned off as much as a hundred thousand dollars from that interior-design company of theirs. According to her, he overcharged some customers, pocketed cash payments from others, and phonied up the records. She also figures he took kickbacks from suppliers."

Several things I *did* see.

"Evidently she accused him of it earlier this week. He denied everything. She's got an auditor going over the books, but that takes time. That's why she hired you."

Add them all up, put them all together—a pattern.

"The money is all she cares about, Klein says. She thinks Hornback

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spent part of it on the alleged girl friend, but she means to get back whatever's left. That kind of woman can stir up a lot of trouble. No telling what kind of accusations she's liable to—"

Sure. A pattern.

"Hey!" Eberhardt said. "Are you listening to me?"

"What?"

"What's the matter with you? I'm not just talking to hear the sound of my own voice."

I stood up and took a couple of turns around the office. "I think I've got something, Eb."

"Got something? You mean answers?"

"Maybe." I sat down again. "Did you see Hornback's body yourself this morning?"

"I saw it. Why?"

"Were there any marks on it besides the stab wound and the scratches? Any other sort of wound, no matter how small?"

He thought. "No. Except for a Band-Aid on one of his fingers, if that matters—"

"You bet it does," I said. "Get Klein in here, would you? I want to ask him a couple of questions."

Eberhardt gave me a narrow look, but he buzzed out into the squad room and asked for Klein. Ben came in a few seconds later.

"When you checked over Hornback's car last night," I asked him, "was the emergency brake set?"

"No, I don't think so."

"What about the transmission? Was the lever in Park or Neutral?"

"Neutral."

"I thought so. That's the answer then."

Eberhardt said, "You know how Hornback's body disappeared from his car?"

"Yes. Only it *didn't* disappear from the car."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning the body was never inside it," I said. "Hornback wasn't murdered on the lookout. He was killed later on, somewhere else."

"What about the blood on the front seat?"

"He put it there himself deliberately—by cutting his finger with something sharp, like maybe a razor blade. That's the reason for the Band-Aid."

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"Why would he do a crazy thing like that?"

"Because he was planning to disappear."

"Come on, you're talking in riddles."

"No, I'm not. If Mrs. Hornback is right about her husband stealing that money—and she has to be—he was wide open to criminal charges. And she's just the type who would press charges. He had no intention of hanging around to face them; his plan from the beginning had to be to stockpile as much money as he could and, when his wife began to tumble to what he was doing, to split with it. With this girl friend of his, no doubt.

"But he didn't just want to hop a plane for somewhere; that would have made him an obvious fugitive. So he worked out a clever gimmick, or what he thought was clever anyway. He intended to vanish under mysterious circumstances so it would look like he'd met with foul play—abandon his car in an isolated spot with blood all over the front seat. It's been done before and he knew it probably wouldn't fool anybody but he had nothing to lose by trying.

"O.K. This little disappearing act of his was in the works for last night—which is why he stopped at the drugstore in North Beach after dinner, to buy razor blades and Band-Aids. But something happened long before he headed up to Twin Peaks that altered the shape of his plan."

Both Eberhardt and Klein were watching me intently. Eb said, "What was that?"

"He spotted me," I said. "I guess I'm getting old and less careful on a tail job than I used to be; either that or he just tumbled to me by accident. I don't suppose it matters. Anyhow, he realized early in the evening that he had a tail—and it wouldn't have taken much effort for him to figure out I was a private detective hired by his wife to get the goods on him. That was when he shifted gears from a half-clever idea to a really clever one. He'd go through with his disappearing act all right, but he'd do it in front of a witness—and under a set of contrived circumstances that were *really* mysterious."

"It's a pretty good scenario so far," Eberhardt said. "But I'm still waiting to find out how he managed to disappear while you were sitting there watching his car."

"He didn't," I said.

"There you go with the riddles again."

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"Follow me through. After he left Dewey's Place—while he was stopped at the traffic light on Portola or when he was driving up Twin Peaks Boulevard—he used the razor blade to slice open his finger and drip blood on the seat. Then he bandaged the cut. That took care of part of the trick. The next part came when he reached the lookout.

"There's a screen of cypress trees along the back edge of the lookout where you turn in off the spur road. They create a blind spot for anybody still on Twin Peaks Boulevard, as I was at the time; I couldn't see all of the lookout until after I'd turned onto the spur. As soon as Hornback came into that blind spot he jammed on his brakes and cut his headlights. I told Ben about that—seeing the brake lights flash through the trees and the headlights go dark. It didn't strike me at the time, but when you think about it it's a little odd that somebody would switch off his lights on a lookout like that, with a steep slope at the far end, *before* he stops his car."

Eberhardt said, "I think I see the rest of it coming."

"Sure. He hit the brakes hard enough to bring the Dodge almost, but not quite, to a full stop. At the same time he shoved the transmission into Neutral, shut off the engine, and opened the door. The bulb for the dome light was defective so he didn't have to worry about that. Then he slipped out, pushed down the lock button—a little added mystery—closed the door again, and ran a few steps into the trees where there were enough heavy shadows to hide him and conceal his escape from the area.

"Meanwhile, the car drifted forward nice and slow and came to a halt nose-up against the guard rail. I saw that much, but what I didn't see was the brake lights flash again. As they should have if Hornback was still inside the car and stopping it in the normal way."

"One thing," Klein said. "What about that match flare you saw after the car was stopped?"

"That was a nice convincing touch," I said. "When the match flamed, I naturally assumed it was Hornback lighting another cigarette. But I realize now that I didn't see anything after that—no sign of a glowing cigarette in the darkness. What really happened is this: he'd fired a cigarette on his way up to the lookout; I noticed a match flare then too. Before he left the car he put the smoldering butt in the ashtray along with an unused match. As soon as the hot ash burned down far enough it touched off the match. Simple as that."

Eberhardt made chewing sounds on his pipe stem. "O.K.," he said,

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"you've explained the disappearance. Now explain the murder. Who killed Hornback? Not his wife?"

"No. The last place he would have gone was home and the last person he would have contacted was Mrs. Hornback. It has to be the girl friend. She would be the one who picked him up near the lookout. An argument over the money, maybe—something like that. You'll find out eventually why she did it."

"We won't find out anything unless we know who we're looking for. You got any more rabbits in your hat? Like the name of this girl friend?"

"I don't know her name," I said, "but I think I can tell you where to find her."

He stared at me. "Well?"

"I followed Hornback around to a lot of places last night," I said. "Restaurant, drugstore, newsstand for a pack of cigarettes, Dewey's Place for a couple of drinks to shore up his courage—all reasonable stops. But why did he go to the branch library? Why would a man plotting his own disappearance bother to return a couple of library books? Unless the books were just a cover, you see? Unless he really went to the library to tell someone who worked there what he was going to do and where to come pick him up."

"A *librarian?*"

"Why not, Eb? Librarians aren't the stereotypes of fiction. This one figures to be young and attractive, whoever she is. You shouldn't have too much trouble picking out the right one."

He kept on staring at me. Then he shook his head and said, "You know something? You're getting to be a regular Sherlock Holmes in your old age."

"If I am," I said as I stood up, "you're getting to be a regular Lestrade."

That made him scowl. "Who the hell is Lestrade?"

The following day, while I was trying to find a better place to hang the blow-up of the 1932 *Black Mask* cover I keep in my office, Eberhardt called to fill in the final piece. Hornback's girl friend worked at the branch library, all right. Her name was Linda Fields, and she had broken down under police interrogation and confessed to the murder.

The motive behind it was stupid and childish, like a lot of motives behind crimes of passion: Hornback wanted to go to South America, and she wanted to stay in the U.S. They had argued about it on the way to

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her apartment, the argument had turned nasty after they arrived, Hornback had slapped her, she had picked up a butcher knife, and that was it for him. Afterward she had dragged his body back into her car, taken it to Golden Gate Park, and dumped it. What was left of the stolen money—$98,000 in cash—had been hidden in her apartment. That would make Mrs. Hornback happy—sweet lady that she was—and insure my getting paid for my services.

When Eberhardt finished telling me this, there was a long pause. "Listen," he said, "who's this Lestrade you mentioned yesterday?"

"That's still bothering you, is it?"

"Who is he, damn it? Some character in one of your pulps?"

"Nope. He's a cop in the Sherlock Holmes stories—the one Holmes keeps outwitting."

Eberhardt made a snorting noise, called me something uncomplimentary, and banged the phone down in my ear.

Laughing to myself, I went back to the *Black Mask* poster. Eb was no Lestrade, of course—and I was no Sherlock Holmes. I was the next best thing though. At least to my way of thinking, and in spite of my dream.

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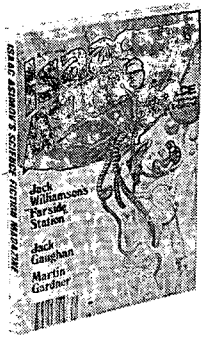

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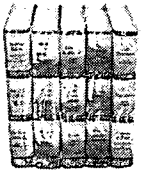

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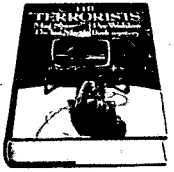

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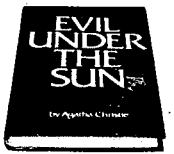

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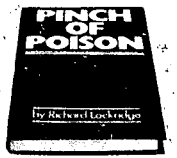

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